

A DETECTIVE UNAWARES

G.F.
PERCIVALE LEA

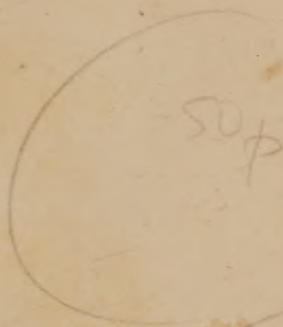


KU-426-727



M. L. J. Rits on

1928



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by
G. F.
PERCIVALE
LEA

SECOND EDITION



*Publishers
since 1812*

HURST & BLACKETT, LTD.
PATERNOSTER HOUSE, E.C.

THE
DETECTIVE
CLAY WARRIORS

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

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CHAPTER I

PROLOGUE

THROUGHOUT his life John Franklin had made something of a cult of Smallness. He himself was a small man, only 5 feet 5 inches in his socks, and he lived in a smallish house for which all the furniture was made to scale. His billiard-table was probably the smallest in the world, not so large, in fact, as the one on which he dined.

By profession he was an artist, painting pictures of a size to fit easily into the sitting-rooms of flats and modern houses ; and as in addition to real talent he had that happy temperament, that mixture of modesty and self-confidence which would seem to be half the secret of good fortune, he prospered exceedingly, and at the age of fifty found himself with wealth and popularity which were by no means small. Frankly aware of what he could and what he could not do, aware, too, that not even by infinite pains could he turn his talent into genius, he yet took infinite pains with it. Then met criticism of either kind with a gay, disarming serenity.

The ordinary disappointments and misadventures of life he took with the same light-hearted courage, before which they seemed literally to melt and vanish. He was open-hearted and kindly, but not without the dignity which many small people possess, and not without a certain natural shrewdness.

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He had no compunction at all, for instance, in carefully grading the prices of his pictures—selling cheaply to the connoisseurs and aristocracy, and at double rates to the *nouveaux-riches*; and in this way he pleased everybody. The collectors and dilettanti were glad to get pictures which they could display on their walls and probably sell at a profit; the profiteers proud of three-hundred-guineas-worth of art in a style admired by the best people. Meanwhile John sold his pictures.

He had a boyish chuckling laugh and a host of friends to whom he gave very ready friendship; for he knew himself to be fortunate and enviable, and he naïvely rejoiced that in his case envy did not entail hatred and malice.

A crumpled rose-leaf there was in his lot, but it was only lately that John had discovered it. Suddenly and quite unexpectedly there had occurred to him a doubt which threatened his peace of mind—a doubt whether anything of real importance had ever happened to him; or (worse still) ever would happen. It seemed to him all at once that his had been an almost uneventful life. A small private income had saved him the early troubles of some of his artist friends, and he had progressed steadily from the start. During the war he had acted as a special constable, complaining afterwards that he had never been called on to deal even with a Drunk and Disorderly. Since then he had thought occasionally of "travelling"; but his small pictures were selling better than ever; he had got the money-making habit and did not wish to break it—or even to risk breaking it. Yet certainly this vague discontent was growing on him, and he often found himself wondering wistfully whether he had it in him to be a Man of Action.

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He was a widower with one daughter, Muriel, now aged nineteen; and at one time he had thought that to provide this child with all she could want in the present and a reasonable fortune at his death would be an aim quite large enough for him. But as he drew nearer to realising it, that aim seemed to grow less and less satisfying.

Muriel meanwhile had grown up, or thought herself grown up, and was clamouring to marry the man of her choice, a man called Harold Nelson, an artist like John himself—though of a very different style. The father did not wholly approve that choice, though he had nothing definite to urge against it, and supposed the two must have their way. Muriel was headstrong, her lover even more so, and John was not going to stir up trouble by opposing them. This was not the sort of change for which he vaguely wished. It was for Opportunity . . . the opportunity to do something really big at last.

And so we meet him one warm day in May in his own house at Chelsea, in the little upstairs sitting-room which was specially his, and specially characteristic of him. He had no sort of premonition that at this moment he was on the verge of the biggest happenings of his life or that within a few hours he would be racking his brains to recall in minutest detail the events on which he was now quite casually though rather ruefully pondering; events which had certainly ruffled his habitual serenity, but to which he attached no special importance.

The trouble had begun at lunch . . . something distinctly wrong. . . . Or had it been even earlier? He seemed now to remember ominous signs about Muriel at breakfast. Harold had dined with them the night before,

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leaving the house very soon afterwards. Had there been a quarrel? He knew they had had one or two stormy scenes before this, though he had been careful not to enquire too closely about them. At any rate there was no doubt that at the luncheon table Muriel was unmistakably "upset," as her old nurse, Mrs. Smith, would say, and showed it in her flaming cheeks, and in the angry eyes which she resolutely turned from Harold. And Harold, who sat alone on one side of the table, was pretending to ignore the facts, talking louder than usual and throwing back his great head, with its mane of tow-coloured hair, in frequent bursts of laughter. Opposite him were two other guests, Ernest Cathcart, a friend of some years standing, and a silent, graceful girl rather older than Muriel. Ernest Cathcart was a clever doctor who now spent his time in research work at his laboratory quite near. It was he who had first brought Harold to the little Chelsea house, and John sometimes half-wished he had never done so. It could be but a half-wish, for John was incapable of more; and had nothing against his future son-in-law, except perhaps the natural shrinking of a small neat man from one who was large, unkempt and boisterous. He could not be expected to like Harold's loud laugh and voice, his slipshod ways, his habit of dropping tobacco and tobacco-ash when he smoked, of splashing his paints everywhere, of gnawing his nails or the stems of his pipes, pencils and brushes in the pauses of his work; above all, his habit of strewing his possessions indiscriminately about John's neat studio. But these were trifles which Muriel never seemed to mind, and they would ultimately be her concern and not his own. The father of an only daughter, he reflected, is seldom an impartial judge of her husband. He wondered at times whether he

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would have preferred Ernest Cathcart. Ernest had been fond enough of Muriel as a child, when he was in practice, and attended her for chicken-pox and measles ; but he never seemed to realise that she must now be regarded as a woman.

"Just like him . . . always a bit late, poor Ernest !" John thought, considering the pale, dark-haired man with his rather strained, weary expression. "If only he had someone always *at* him, to keep him up to the mark, and put the business side of things before him. These researches of his . . . I have a feeling that he will do all the work and then let someone else step in and take all the credit. And yet if he did once bring off a big success it would be the making of him. He only needs to believe in himself ; for he's clever enough for anything. Perhaps if Muriel cared for him and were older . . . well, I don't know. Perhaps not."

In any case, Muriel did not care for him, classing him with other "pre-war" friends as entirely obsolete. And Ernest himself, beyond a vague surprise that Muriel should be old enough to be married at all, showed little enough interest in the engagement that had followed so quickly on his friend's introduction to the household. Her father, in fact, often wished he would show more, and tell them more than he ever had about this friend of his who was so unlike himself. But it was never easy to get Ernest to talk of people, and Harold he never discussed at all. John was on excellent terms, however, with both the younger men, and both called him by his Christian name and treated him as an equal. There were times, indeed, when with his slim figure and gay infectious smile, he seemed the youngest of the three ; for Harold

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Nelson, huge of frame with strongly-marked features, looked older than he was, and Ernest, always thoughtful and preoccupied, never suggested youth.

The remaining guest at the table, the girl, who sat on John's left, was a Miss Phyllis Brown, who was said to have made a reputation as a cinema star; but if this were true she was singularly reticent on the subject; and at the present time would seem to be out of an engagement, for she was posing daily as Cleopatra in John's studio, both for himself and for Harold Nelson. With regular features, a cream-white skin, dark hair and long, dark eyes and brows, she created an impression of almost startling beauty, but beyond this it was difficult to get any other impression. She was habitually silent, but, as John reflected, she might have been instructed that silence suited her rather mysterious type of looks. When she did speak it was with a precise deliberateness, but this again, might be the result of lessons in elocution. Or it might be an effort to overcome a Cockney accent. She was inscrutable to John, and he never felt much desire to pierce through the inscrutability. Harold Nelson raved about her looks, and it was he who had "discovered" her, and introduced her to John, finally persuading him to make a small study of her, while he himself undertook a startling full-length impressionist picture.

To-day for the first time John suddenly wondered whether Muriel ever objected to this outspoken admiration, whether she felt that comparisons might be made between herself and Miss Brown . . . and he glanced across at her now, trying impersonally to appraise his little daughter. Small, fair-haired and blue-eyed like himself, with a brilliant complexion (even when not heightened by temper), she was, he

supposed, commonplace beside the other girl, with her statuesque profile and startling contrasts of colouring. But could any man of ordinary senses prefer that icily-regular expressionless mask to Muriel's vivid sparkling face? He could not believe it; and he turned now to Harold, who was at this moment calling across the table :

"Do you mean to say, Cleopatra, that you've never heard of Dr. Cathcart's marvellous research-work? All those discoveries of his that are going to turn the world upside down, and inside out?"

Miss Brown just raised her long dark eyes from her plate, and glancing aside at Ernest murmured, "No."

"You've never heard that he's invented an infallible antidote to poison-gas, that will revolutionise warfare and make England safe against air attacks for ever? Well, you astound me! He's going to make millions by it, aren't you, Ernest?"

There was an odd note of mockery in his tone which was most unusual, and which surprised John. He was surprised, too, that Harold should speak at all before an outsider of his friend's private work—work in which he had hitherto expressed the keenest interest, and in which John always believed him to have some share. Ernest, however, who disliked Miss Brown and had edged almost imperceptibly away from her when she turned to him, answered Harold quietly enough with a mere "Do you think so?"

"Think? Why, it's a dead certainty! And when he's got it in a soluble form he's going to impregnate the necessary material and make gas-masks for us all, that'll be impervious to any kind of poison-gas whatsoever. You see the idea? You carry one of 'em about with you, and if a bomb drops

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on you all you have to do is to snatch this thing and put it on. . . . And there you are! Couldn't be simpler."

"Then we'd all better start practising how to put on masks at a moment's notice," John said.

"No need to practise what comes by nature," Harold retorted; "everyone puts on a mask to conceal something or other."

"Well, really, I don't think I do," John protested.

"I don't know about that, John," Harold said severely; "don't you wear one when you look on your pictures and on mine? Don't you try to conceal from me that you think yours little gems of purest ray serene, and mine nothing but gimcrack trash? Speak up now. Confess!"

"Ah, yes, there's that, of course," John said, chuckling.

"And as for you, Cleopatra," Harold went on, "you're an actress, and bound to wear one. And you, too, Ernest, because you're a doctor and have to inspire confidence somehow and trick people out of their money. And Muriel wears one for just the opposite reason—because she's young and innocent, and more ashamed of that than Ernest is of being a swindler. She wants people to think she's old and experienced—old enough to know her own mind. Which of course, you don't," turning now to Muriel herself.

"And what do you wear a mask for?" she flashed back in reply.

"Oh, I don't wear one at all, because I never pretend anything and never care a straw what people think of me. If I choose to do a thing I do it, and if I want anything I just walk in and take it in broad daylight."

"I suppose that's what you call the Art that doesn't conceal Art," John said. "But I've caught you for once,

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Harold. Ernest, wasn't it only yesterday I discovered he had got something out of me on false pretences? "

" Yes, daddy! " Muriel cut in before Ernest could speak.

" False pretences! " Harold exclaimed, flinging down his knife and fork with a clatter that made John fear for his polished table. "*False pretences!* Of all monstrous, unjust accusations! And Ernest called as a witness against me, and says nothing. Isn't it always the way? The wicked flourish like a green bay-tree, while the honest poor man is cut down, dried up and withered like grass. But just you wait, my lad. A time *will* come! "

Ernest, who was looking rather paler and wearier than usual, took no notice of this sally, but turned to speak to Muriel, getting smartly snubbed in reply.

" Poor Ernest," John thought; " he's catching it from both of them! " and to create a diversion, went on, " By the way, what about this afternoon? Are you and Muriel coming to look at that house? "

" House? What house? " Harold demanded, clutching at his hair.

" Well, wasn't that the plan? Weren't you both coming with me? It's an ideal place, and you won't have a chance if you don't snap it up at once."

" And what about the ideal premium? "

" Yes, that's stiff, of course," John said, pretending to consider it, but in reality still more surprised. This was literally the first time he had ever heard Harold speak as though money or the want of money could possibly interfere with any plan of his. He was lavish and careless with it as with everything else; and John knew, moreover, that as an artist he was growing in popularity, and his impressionist

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pictures selling as fast as he could paint them. This, then, would be another form of pleasantry? . . . "It's stiff, of course," he repeated, "but I don't believe you'll get one for less. And I thought you had set your hearts on the place."

"Oh, it's not my heart I'm thinking of, it's my pocket," Harold said.

"I don't think you'll get one for less," was all John could answer. He did not at all know how to take this, and glanced at his daughter for enlightenment; but Muriel might have been imitating Miss Brown, so entirely impenetrable was her expression.

"Then I shall have to do without a house, like many another man of genius," Harold said, and wiped his eyes with his table-napkin. "Unless—" with a sudden look round, "unless some plutocrat will come to my assistance. *You* won't, John, of course, because you're jealous of me; and Ernest won't because he spends every penny he can lay hands on on his gas-masks. But what about you, Cleopatra? I know you're simply rolling, with those million-pounds-a-minute contracts, and all that interest in the Bank! Do you feel inclined to endow me with some of your worldly goods?"

Miss Brown looked across at him and answered rather more quickly than usual, "I'm afraid they don't exist."

Muriel sat like a thundercloud.

"I see how it is!" Harold cried; "you're all against me. In spite of what I've done for you all, you're in a conspiracy against me. What would be the use of a house to me when I haven't a friend in the world?" and burying his face in the table-napkin he began to sob loudly.

A faint smile hovered on Miss Brown's lips at this buffoonery, and John saw it, and saw that Muriel, as she turned

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sharply from Harold, had seen it too. Knowing her temper, and now at the end of his own patience, he struck the little silver gong beside his plate, and jumping to his feet went to the door and called on Mrs. Smith, who had a tiny sitting-room on the same floor, to come and make coffee for them. "Just make it in here, on the spirit lamp," he said, determined not to let her leave them, for he felt that the presence of even one outsider might restore normality to his party.

Mrs. Smith, having long since outgrown her duties as nurse, was now John's housekeeper and stand-by in all domestic matters. She was a woman of unusual perceptive gifts, seeing and hearing everything while appearing all the time intent on her own affairs, and to these gifts she added the rarer one of absolute discretion. Only if she were directly questioned would she speak of what she noticed. By a certain deliberateness of movement now she showed John that she knew the purpose of her presence; and he noticed that her eyes rested for a second on Muriel's hands which were shaking as she offered cigarettes to Miss Brown (who demurely refused them); but even this was a more than ordinary betrayal of interest.

Harold sat mopping his eyes and emitting from time to time a sudden startling sob; but the others left their places, glad to ease the tension by movement, until Mrs. Smith said quietly to John: "The coffee is ready now, sir. Would you care for me to take it into the garden?"

Blessed suggestion! It was a glorious spring day, and in the freedom and fresh air the party could move naturally and separate or come together without restraint. He agreed at once, and led the way out by the side door of the house, the rest following.

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He was proud of his garden, as of all his possessions, and just now it was gay with splashes of colour against the London grime and smoke. It was small, of course ; but its irregular shape, two or three old trees and a tiny shrubbery gave it an air of space. They passed along the curving path which skirted the angle of the house and so to the grass-plot. The place was surrounded by stone walls in one of which was a gate, known on the outer side as the " Tradesmen's entrance," and through this John's models came, watched by Mrs. Smith, whose sitting-room window overlooked it. Miss Brown, however, was on a different footing, and passed in and out by the ordinary front-door. That Mrs. Smith had noticed this difference John had no doubt, and he wondered what she made of it, resolving some day to find out.

Having crossed the lawn and reached his favourite seat under the mulberry-tree, he directed the position of the garden-table for the coffee, which Mrs. Smith poured out. She then retired, murmuring to John as she passed, " I shall be in the den, sir, if you want me." Her own little room was nicknamed the den.

As John sat down Muriel walked to the shrubbery and the others scattered, making no attempt to coalesce. Miss Brown drifted round examining the flower-beds ; Harold lit a pipe and threw himself on his back under an apple-tree near the house ; Ernest alone remained near John.

" Well," the latter said in a low voice over the coffee-cups, " that luncheon-party wasn't one of our successes ! What on earth is the matter with Harold to-day ? "

Ernest, who never criticised Harold, was silent ; but as John glanced at him, expecting an answer, said shortly, " Need you ask ? "

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"Need I ask?" John echoed; but at this moment Miss Brown drifted towards them and John saw Ernest's eyes rest upon her with peculiar intent and then turn again to himself as though to say, "Need I answer?"

He felt so confused at this incident that he hardly caught Miss Brown's tentative remark: "Shall you want me this afternoon, Mr. Franklin?" But before he could answer, Harold called from his prone position:

"Hi! Cleopatra. What are you up to? I shall want you at three o'clock. I mean to finish that white dress this afternoon, or perish."

Miss Brown bowed her head in acquiescence; but John felt distinctly affronted. The arrangement to view the house had been a definite one and he had never been told it was abandoned. "I'll be ready at three," Miss Brown said, and drifted away once more. Muriel at the same moment drew near.

"Perhaps I'd better be going," Ernest remarked. "Shall you be having tea in the studio this afternoon?" He often dropped in at half-past four when John stopped painting and Muriel came in to pour out tea.

"No!" Muriel said loudly and clearly for Harold to hear. "Neither daddy nor I will be at the studio. We're going out *for the whole afternoon!*" Her voice was hard and angry, and there was nothing childish about her just then.

"Then I'll say good-bye," Ernest said, and walked across the garden. As he passed Harold, the latter got up and strolled with him round the angle of the house, which hid them for a few minutes. Then Ernest passed out by the side gate while Harold walked back to his apple-tree.

John, meanwhile slipping his arm through Muriel's, drew

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her to the little shrubbery and attempted a gentle remonstrance. "We really can't have this sort of thing, really can't, you know, my dear, whatever the cause may be. Especially not before a stranger like Miss Brown."

"Oh," Muriel answered with lofty unconcern. "Oh, I thought it was got up for her special benefit. But if you see anything odd in guests amusing themselves at the expense of their hosts—there's an easy way to prevent it."

"Why, my dear, I didn't mean that," John said, laughing. He knew this lofty unconcern and whither it might tend. "No one minds what Harold says when he's in one of his mad moods! And I didn't see that he was hitting at us in particular. I thought it was poor old Ernest who was getting the worst of it."

"Yes, poor old Ernest, always in the clouds and never even knowing when he's hit at; or attempting to stand up for himself . . . or—or anyone else."

"There I think you're wrong. I think he was trying to keep things smooth. As for Miss Brown, you see, she isn't an ordinary model——"

"I should think I do see it. Look at her clothes—the way she's dressed to-day! An ordinary model!"

"Well, but she's supposed to be a cinema star, isn't she? And aren't they all enormously rich? She seems to me quite a harmless little thing who has probably been told she looks like a sphinx; so she tries to live up to the part. Quite right, too, if she can make a fortune by it. And if she chose to put on a smart frock for my luncheon-party, I think it was a very pretty attention. She certainly looks very charming in it."

"Oh, of course. But if she's so rich, it seems rather

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strange, doesn't it, that Harold should pay her so highly for sitting to him? Especially as he's *so poor*!"

"As to that I know nothing. He made all the arrangements with her; I only provided the studio. But we aren't likely to see much more of her; the pictures are practically finished. In fact, I asked her to lunch to-day because I really thought she might not be coming again. Why do you concern yourself about her? You surely don't imagine that Harold——"

"I don't imagine anything; and I certainly don't concern myself about her—or him, either! Everything's broken off between Harold and me. I've told him so."

John, who had heard something like this before, and was not as much impressed as perhaps he should have been, paused a moment, then said: "If you really mean that——"

"Of course I mean it!"

"You know, darling, you're free to do as you like. . . . But if you are in earnest and intend to break your engagement, I do hope you will think well what you're doing, and what it means. Don't act in heat and haste which you may regret afterwards. Now, why not go for a walk, and then come back for tea in the studio and afterwards talk *all* this out quietly with Harold? I'll take the sitting with Miss Brown and tell him not to come before half-past four. What do you think?"

"No! I don't want to see Harold again."

"I think you'd better take a little time and not make your final decision just now."

"I *have* made my final decision. I've told Harold."

"Well, I feel that perhaps he hardly understands how final it is. So do, sweetheart, take my advice. Go for a

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walk and come back and give us tea as usual. Then I'll pack off Miss Brown and pack myself off too. By the way, your cousin Arthur Bertram may be coming over. I said we should be in by five. If he does I'll get him to take me for a spin——"

"It's *you* that don't understand!" she cried; and tearing herself from him, made a dash for the house.

As she passed Harold, who was now leaning against the apple-tree, staring on the ground, he looked up and stepping forward, bowed before her in exaggerated humility and held out a tiny parcel wrapped in white paper.

"Lunatic!" John muttered. He quite expected her to ignore it, but she snatched it from his hand and rushed like a whirlwind to the house, slamming the side-door after her, and, a moment later, the front door also.

"She's gone out, anyway," her father reflected; "but what she'll do next——" However, he was not going to waste time in guessing.

Going up to Harold, he addressed him much as he had done his daughter. "Look here, Harold, you don't need to tell me there's something wrong between you and Muriel." Harold shrugged his shoulders without speaking and pulled at his pipe, which had, however, gone out, "and I'm not going to ask you what it's about. But I'm going to alter that plan of yours for this afternoon. I'll be at the studio at three and give Miss Brown the sitting; and I hope you'll turn up to tea at half-past four, but not till then. Then I'll make myself scarce and leave you and Muriel to your explanations——"

"Explanations! . . . *help*!" Harold groaned.

"Well, is that clear?" John said, his severity shaken by a

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sneaking desire to laugh at Harold's ridiculous face, with the lips turned down and the pipe balanced between them.

"Oh, it's clear enough."

"And you'll be there?"

"I'll be there," Harold echoed; and with the pantomime of a man on the verge of collapse he staggered to the side-gate, waving a hand to John, and calling out as he passed through:

"Tell Cleopatra to leave her Asp for me."

His words recalled the girl to John's mind. Where was Miss Brown? He looked round. She was sitting under the mulberry-tree, and having set up a tiny mirror among the coffee-cups, was examining herself therein, while she pinned a large bunch of white violets to the front of her dress, with a long bar-shaped brooch of platinum and diamonds. Having done this she drew back and studied the effect, smiling to herself. She next took from her bag and gravely considered a tiny powder-puff in an enamelled box. John had often rejoiced in the fact that her lovely skin and lips owed nothing to artifice, and he wondered idly what she would do. After a moment she seemed to decide against the puff and was putting it back, when she heard his steps and started, then rose to her feet. The scent of the violets came to him, and the spring sunshine falling on her face gave her a beauty she surely never had before. He knew every line and turn of that face; but was it the becoming frock, or the sunshine, or was there actually, as there seemed to be, something different about her to-day? Being taller than he, she looked down at him, still with a smile on her lips; but John was not in a mood at the moment to return it, and without his usual urbanity said:

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"I'm so sorry we've made a slight change of plans, Miss Brown. Mr. Nelson won't, after all, be painting this afternoon; but if you'll be here at three, I myself will take the sitting."

Miss Brown picked up her handbag, returned the powder-puff and mirror, and snapped the clasp, showing no trace of surprise or any other feeling. Just turning her head and inclining it towards him in graceful farewell, she said: "Then I think I'll go for a little stroll until three," and drifted to the gate in the wall. She did not find it inconsistent with her dignity to use it to-day, John noticed, and he suddenly thought, "I wonder where she is going?" And then, "Oh, well, I've had enough of them all! Let them settle their affairs as they like!" and turning, went into the house and upstairs to his little sitting-room where he could be certain of not being disturbed. Here, surrounded by the treasures he had collected throughout his life, the exquisite carved ivories, the miniatures, the delicate water-colours and etchings in which his soul delighted, he was at peace; peace which he felt he had honestly earned. The happenings of the last couple of hours had tried him and he mused over them now, as has been said, with a somewhat troubled mind, repeating to himself as he closed his eyes and tried to get a few minutes sleep, that they were not at all in the nature of the change he vaguely desired. He wanted something big . . . not silly lovers' quarrels. . . . And as he gradually grew calm and then dozed, he dreamed of great opportunities which should give him scope for heroic action. . . . Never imagining those which his awakening was to bring.

CHAPTER II

IN THE STUDIO

As the clock struck three John prepared to leave his little room and go downstairs. He had heard Mrs. Smith open the front door to Miss Brown five minutes ago, and heard the latter go into the studio ; but he was not hurrying himself. She had to change into her Cleopatra dress, and though he was rested by his short nap, he still felt the strain of the morning's experiences. He looked forward, too, with some disquiet to the interview between Harold and his daughter, though he had planned a way of escape for himself ; for if Arthur Bertram motored over as he generally did, John meant to go out with him. Arthur, the son of his favourite sister, was a young man just called to the Bar, and his uncle's soul delighted in his smart anecdotes and general cocksureness on all legal matters. Of course, there was the return to be faced . . . the possibility of an angry daughter, and reproaches for his cowardly action in deserting her. Should he keep Arthur to dinner and engage him in a game on the tiny billiard-table afterwards ? Or would this be really too mean a part to play ?

The house was quiet. Muriel had not come back, and no one seemed to be stirring. Mrs. Smith would, of course, be in her little den ; the other two maids in the basement. Both had been with him for years and seemed to thrive

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happily under the housekeeper's rule. Muriel's return from school had in no way disturbed the peace, for she was not interested in domestic matters, and moreover had got engaged almost at once. Mrs. Smith, having been her nurse in babyhood, seemed the natural mainspring of the establishment. John smiled to himself now as he thought of her, knowing that if he peeped into her room, as he sometimes did on his way to work, he should find her intent on her sewing, or making up her accounts, yet ready to spring to attention at a call or sign. He believed that in spite of her devotion to himself Mrs. Smith did not care for artists as a class, and probably lamented the fact that Muriel proposed to marry one. Perhaps she hoped the engagement would never be fulfilled. . . . And if Muriel meant what she said just now . . . But at this point he hastily switched off his thoughts and went downstairs.

The ground floor of the house consisted of a square sunny hall into which the front door opened, with the dining-room opposite. John's studio was on the right-hand ; and on the left was Mrs. Smith's little den, a discreetly veiled access to the basement, and the stairs which made a curving arch over the side-door leading to the garden. John's studio would have been the natural dining-room of the house, but he had built and enlarged it to his own requirements. His sitting-room and bedroom upstairs fitted over it, and this whole block was his own. Mrs. Smith and Muriel might do as they liked elsewhere, but in this part he ruled supreme.

As he marked all the neat and compact appointments John smiled again, sighing only as his eye fell for a moment on the curtain which hung from a high shelf running from the front door to the door of the studio. Behind this was a row

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of hooks from which, though hidden, hung his own overcoats and hats. He had often begged Harold to hang up his in like manner, but had long given up expecting that he ever would. It was Harold's habit to "blow in," as he called it, and fling his things anywhere about the studio. He had done so this very morning, and John knew that the first thing he should see on entering would be Harold's greatcoat sprawling on a chair by his easel. He had thrown it there at ten o'clock, and there it still was. John went at once and took it up. The tag by which it should have hung was torn clean from its place, leaving a jagged gap in the collar. With a word of apology to Miss Brown he carried the thing across to Mrs. Smith, saying, "Just put a loop on this, will you, and hang it up behind the curtain?"

Mrs. Smith considered the collar critically. "It should have a piece let in, sir, to strengthen it before I put on another loop. Will Mr. Harold be wanting it again to-day?"

"He'll be round at half-past four," John said; "but you know he doesn't often wear a coat. He probably won't notice if it isn't ready."

"Mr. Harold is coming to tea, sir?"

"Yes, we shall all be here for tea; and it's possible Mr. Bertram may be here, too."

"Yes, sir. Would Mr. Bertram be staying to dinner?"

"I'm not quite sure: I'll tell you later," John said, turning away hastily.

"Very good, sir. Only thinking you and Miss Muriel were to be out this afternoon I'd given cook and Margaret leave to go to the . . . the cinema." Mrs. Smith knew her place too well to refer to this entertainment as "the pictures."

"Oh, that'll be all right. You can manage tea, and

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perhaps I may dine out with Mr. Bertram . . . if he stays."

"Then if you'll leave the coat on the settee there, sir, I'll see to it later."

John went back to the studio, a room perfectly proportioned and planned; not a colossal place, of course, such as Harold rented; but giving the impression of space and atmosphere. Every detail had been lovingly designed by the artist himself and everything was in keeping with his personality. Of the three pictures on the walls only one was painted by him, a sketch taken from his window above; a peep of the Embankment and the river, caught between the intervening houses. On the narrow ledge of the mantel over the fireplace was a single vase, a priceless treasure, tall, slender, and exquisite in colour. This and a smaller vase with flowers were the only ornaments that struck the eye. All the properties peculiar to his Art were either hidden away or subordinated. The light from the three long windows seemed to fall exactly where it was wanted. No jarring note anywhere spoilt the harmony . . . unless . . . unless, indeed, Harold's easel with its great picture could be said to do so. At this moment, dressed in her scanty Cleopatra dress, Miss Brown was actually standing before it, examining her own pictured image.

"Do you admire it?" John asked rather mischievously, standing beside her.

"No. Not at all," Miss Brown answered so suddenly and decidedly that he turned to look at her in surprise, and seeming to realise this she started, and said in her usual deliberate tones, "I mean I prefer yours"; then stepped on to the dais and assumed her pose.

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John stayed for a moment longer. It was inevitable that the two pictures should be as unlike as they well could be, and this not only in style, but in deliberate arrangement. In John's the girl's white profile showed against a pale background, like a bas-relief in finest limestone, her dark hair and brows lying like shadows. The gold of the uræus, the lotus-flower in her hand and the faint rose of her lips were the only colour he had permitted ; but with an exquisite economy of line and the simplest means he had attained an effect both delicate and strong. It was one of his happiest efforts, and had its own merit, even when compared with Harold's characteristic rendering of the same subject.

In the larger picture the artist had painted from a different angle, and the Eastern queen was seen in a setting of riotous and flaring colour, her face, with the long dark eyes turned full to the beholder, while seeming to look beyond. Harold, of course, had scorned anything so banal as a " likeness " ; and though he had concentrated on the face itself and rendered all subordinate details perfunctorily, it was evident he was interested to express only his own individual impression of it. Was it necessarily the true one, or was truth too a commonplace not to be considered ? There was something primitive and barbaric about the whole thing, and the sheer colour and audacity of it struck the eye with a sense of shock. Beside it the smaller study was severe, impersonal. " But these fellows will overdo the personal touch some day," John thought as he turned to his own easel and took up his brush.

As he began to paint, some speculations about the girl herself passed through his mind. Who and what was she ? What were her thoughts as she posed there silent and inscrutable, except for that enigmatic smile on her lips ? A film

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actress? But had she a home? He could not fit her into any imagined surroundings, and he had never been able to learn anything about her from herself. She sometimes stayed to tea if Muriel came to give it to them, but never if he and Harold were alone. He turned over this fact in his mind now, wondering how it should be regarded in the light of the new idea that had come to him, and of that strange look Ernest had thrown at her. He remembered, too, that once or twice he had seen her watching Muriel with peculiar intentness. Why? Occasionally he himself had tried to talk to her and to establish some kind of natural and human relationship, but her answers had been so guarded, so elaborately uttered and so noncommittal that he soon wearied of the attempt. He had a sudden impulse now to ask her abrupt questions, and make her speak; but it was contrary to his instinctive courtesy. The moment passed; he grew absorbed in his painting. . . .

So absorbed, indeed, that when at about five minutes before tea-time Muriel slipped in, followed by Mrs. Smith and the tray, he hardly noticed the fact; but when, with a stab of remembrance, he did look at her he saw her calm now, calm and determined-looking. Determined on what? She at once set about her preparations, putting the kettle on a jet of gas beside her chair, ladling tea into the pot, arranging cups; and while she was thus engaged Harold Nelson walked in.

"Hullo!" he said, with a quick look round; "so the cauldron bubbles and we meet again, like the witches in 'Macbeth'!" Muriel, intent on the tea-things, did not raise her eyes. "Oh, Cleopatra!" he suddenly shouted; "don't for heaven's sake move! One moment! You're

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perfect this afternoon. I simply MUST——” He snatched up his brush and squeezed paint on to his palette. . . . “One moment longer. . . . I must get this——”

Mrs. Smith left the room, and this being the signal for her release, Miss Brown, with just a glance at Harold, relaxed her position and stepped down from the dais; then catching up a silken wrap she threw it over her scanty dress, slipped her feet into a pair of sandals and moved to the tea table to be of use to the tea-maker, as was her invariable custom.

John was putting his brushes in turpentine and Harold painted on with furious strokes, taking no notice of the model’s withdrawal. Miss Brown took a cup of tea from Muriel’s hands and set it down on a little table beside his easel, then returned to the tea-tray, where John joined her.

Suddenly, and without a moment’s warning, a loud and terrible cry filled the room, and Harold Nelson fell crashing to the floor, his easel, picture and table crashing with him.

“Is this more fooling?” darted through John’s mind; then as he turned: “My God, what is it?” and he rushed to Harold’s side. Muriel sprang to do the same. Miss Brown shrieked; it was a moment of horror.

“Stand back—stand back! He’s fainted,” John cried out. “Call Mrs. Smith.” But Mrs. Smith was already at the door. “Ring up Dr. Cathcart at his laboratory: tell him to come here at once——” He was bending over the fallen man, trying to loosen his collar.

“Let me do it, oh, let me!” poor Muriel cried.

“No, [Muriel . . . run and find some brandy—— Miss Brown, there’s water on the chest there”; John tried to get his arm under the strong shoulders, and Mrs. Smith coming back, hurried to help.

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"Dr. Cathcart's coming this moment. Oh, sir, what is it?"

"I don't know; it may be concussion," John said. "Keep the girls back if you can. What do you think it is?" Their eyes met in horror and bewilderment.

"Oh, dear, sir, it looks like death," Mrs. Smith said in a trembling whisper. The same conviction had seized John. The young man who a moment ago had been the embodiment of boisterous health, now lay in death-like stillness, his eyes half-open, his lips parted. . . .

"He *can't* be dead. What could be the reason?" John cried. "Oh, what are we to do? Why doesn't Ernest come?"

Mrs. Smith got up quickly as he spoke and hurried to the front door. Next moment Ernest was in the room.

"John! you here—Muriel . . . ?" he cried out in bewilderment. "What . . . what has happened?"

"Thank God you've come," John said. "It's Harold. See!" But Ernest was already bending over the body, laying his hand on the heart.

"Oh, Ernest, what is it? What's the matter with him?" Muriel cried, rushing back to the room; "he isn't dead . . . he isn't *dead*?"

"No . . . no, Muriel; it's a fit of some kind," Ernest said distractedly; "don't come near; leave me alone with him!"

"He *is* dead, I know he's dead!" Muriel screamed, "and it's my fault . . . all my fault . . . my fault!" Mrs. Smith and Miss Brown rushed to her and caught her as she reeled back.

"For God's sake get her away, John. She doesn't know

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what she's saying ! " Ernest implored. " Clear the room, let me be alone——" and he knelt by the body trying to screen it from the others.

" Muriel, darling, try to be calm ! " her father said. " Go with Mrs. Smith for a few minutes. We'll call you."

" Oh, I can't go. . . . I *must* know. Ernest, tell me . . . tell me."

Ernest turned, his own face white as death, to John, moving his lips to whisper, " Send her away . . ." His forehead was wet with sweat.

" Muriel, come at once," John said determinedly. " Leave things to Ernest. Muriel, darling, come ! "

" He's dead ! And it's all through me, all my fault ! " she cried again. A sudden knock at the door startled them, and a tall fair-haired youth in a motoring-coat stepped into the room.

" I found the front door open and thought I might venture——" he began. " Oh ! " and stopped in horror.

" Arthur ! " John said, recognising his nephew. " Yes, something terrible has happened. Don't ask me now. Help Mrs. Smith to get Muriel away. Take her upstairs . . . then come back at once ! "

Arthur, flinging down his cap, sprang to catch the girl and carried her out, Mrs. Smith following. Miss Brown, whiter than ever, her eyes wide with horror, was clinging to the mantelpiece, and John trying to collect himself said : " Just take your things, Miss Brown, and go to the dining-room ; I'll come and speak to you presently." Then when she had snatched together her clothes and rushed out he turned round sharply :

" Now, Ernest, what is it ? Tell me the truth."

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"Dead," Ernest said, rising at last to his feet.

"Dead? Oh, God! But how?"

"Wait a moment, John," Ernest said distractedly; "tell me what had happened. How long had he been here? What was he doing?"

In hurried stammering words John gave him the account to which Ernest listened with a set face.

"But had he had any tea? Had he eaten or drunk anything?" he asked, his eyes searching everywhere.

"There was a cup of tea beside him, but I don't know whether he tasted it. You see the pieces; it's smashed to atoms."

"He didn't take anything from any of the plates?"

"He never went near the table. He walked from the door to the easel and there he dropped, just as you see him."

Ernest got on his knees once more, running his long, skilled fingers over the clothing of the still figure, though seeming hardly to touch it.

"Ernest, what was it? What was the cause?"

"Give me time, John," Ernest said again, and turned now to the fallen paint-tubes which he touched and turned over in the same delicate fashion.

"Let us get some of these things out of the way," John said, picking up the overturned table. "The paint will be trodden all over the place."

Ernest began to help him, then stopped abruptly. "Perhaps we had better leave everything as it is . . ." he said hesitating.

"What do you mean? What's in your mind?" John said, growing white.

"There's one thing we can do, though," the other answered

quickly ; " this room's too hot. Get the windows open, John, while I turn off the gas " : the kettle was now steaming and boiling furiously.

The studio windows were constructed on a plan of John's own and opened from the top by means of pulleys, and he found his hands trembling so that he could hardly manage them. Ernest, who was by the fireplace, his eyes searching everywhere, started at the sight of his face as he turned round. " John, you're all done in ! Let me get you some brandy ; where is it ? "

" It's in the dining-room if Muriel didn't bring it. But not now, Ernest ; not here," John began, and at the same moment Arthur Bertram rushed back into the room.

" I've left her with Mrs. Smith," he said. " John, what on earth has been happening ? Harold not moved yet ? " and in a moment he, too, was by the dead man's side.

After a long pause he looked at Ernest. " Dead ! " he said ; " Poison ! "

Ernest nodded.

" Prussic-acid ? " Arthur added.

" Yes," the other replied.

" Suicide," Arthur said and rose to his feet. The word though hardly formed seemed to fill the whole room.

" Poison ! Suicide ! " John cried out ; " it's impossible ! Ernest, you know it's impossible ! "

Ernest was silent.

" It's some mistake ; it was never suicide ! " John declared ; " Ernest, why don't you speak ? You know it must have been a mistake——"

" I don't know what to think," Ernest stammered wretchedly.

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"People don't generally make mistakes about prussic-acid," Arthur said; "but how was it taken? Did you find anything?"

"No; that's what's been puzzling me. He has swallowed it, as you see, but I can't find a bottle or a trace of anything of the sort. No capsule; nothing in the pockets—nothing in the hands. But I've had so little time," rather resentfully; "a bottle may have rolled into some corner. I've made no definite search. I was only here a few minutes before you came, and he was dead then. I know no more than you do. I haven't even had time to make a detailed examination."

"No, no," John said. "You've been extraordinarily patient, Ernest. But if you had been here when he came in you'd know it couldn't have been suicide. He wasn't in the room ten minutes altogether. He had just done a few strokes of painting and suddenly he cried out and on the moment fell like that and never moved again. He was laughing and joking a second before. I even thought this might be a joke for a moment,—done, perhaps to tease Muriel——"

"But did he expect to find Muriel here? I thought he was to be at the studio alone and that you and she were going out for the afternoon," Ernest said.

"Oh, I altered all that after you left. I arranged to give Miss Brown the sitting, and told Harold not to come till tea-time. The idea was, you see, that I should go off with Arthur, while Muriel and Harold made up their little misunderstanding."

"Hullo, what's all this? What misunderstanding?" Arthur cried; "was it serious?"

"I don't know exactly what it was. Harold, poor fellow, was fond of teasing, you know, and had professed a wild sort

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of admiration for this Miss Brown we were painting. I think perhaps he had overdone it and Muriel lost patience with him."

Arthur moved and looked down at Harold's picture which lay face-upwards near his feet.

"This is Miss Brown, the girl with the gold band on her hair who rushed out of the room just now?" he said, and his face changed, as he glanced first at his uncle and then at Ernest.

"A model?"

"Not exactly; no."

"What then? An actress? I seem to have seen the face."

"She is a film-actress, I believe."

"Someone you know?" Arthur persisted.

"Harold introduced her to us," John said, beginning to hate this cross-examination.

"Harold introduced her!" Arthur repeated and he looked again at the picture and then again at Ernest who would not meet his eyes, but turned resolutely away.

"Well," the young barrister said at last; "well, of course we can't keep the thing private. It means . . . means letting the police know as soon as possible."

"Oh surely—surely not!" John cried. "What do you say, Ernest? Is it impossible to give an ordinary death certificate? Dr. Cathcart's a qualified doctor, Arthur."

Ernest turned to him, too; "If I could—" he began.

"No; impossible!" the other replied. "It would ruin Dr. Cathcart; don't suggest such a thing, Uncle John. Besides it would be no good; the truth is bound to come out."

"And how much else?" was the thought in each mind, and the three men stood and looked at each other. Then John drew away from the others and walked across the room,

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his mind working furiously : " I shall offend them both now," he thought, but his resolution was taken.

" I'll tell you what I shall do," he said, facing them quite squarely. " You know that little man Turner who was over me when I was a Special Constable in the war ? You must have heard me speak of him and you must have seen him here, Ernest. I don't come across him much now-a-days because he's an inspector of sorts at Scotland Yard and frightfully busy ; but I met him last Wednesday and he said he would be having a holiday this week and would look me up. He's one of the best-hearted fellows in the world and I know he'll help us. I'll ring him up this minute and get him here."

" Scotland Yard ! " exclaimed both the younger men just as John expected, and Arthur added ; " But, Uncle John, this isn't a case for Scotland Yard ! It's either plain suicide or some sort of misadventure as you suggest. We don't need Scotland Yard to come, in order to find out which."

" I don't want him in the capacity of Scotland Yard exactly. I want him as a friend."

" But Scotland Yard is Scotland Yard first, last and all the time," Arthur said. " And, Uncle John, I have some legal experience and I can assure you there is nothing here that Dr. Cathcart and I between us cannot manage for you. Isn't that so, Dr. Cathcart ? "

" It is, John," Ernest said emphatically ; " and I beg you will be guided by Mr. Bertram. If Scotland Yard starts raking about and investigating there'll be no end to the trouble. And it'll all fall on the innocent——"

Arthur looked at him sharply. " Dr. Cathcart, you know the reason . . ." he began.

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"Harold never took me into his confidence," Ernest answered shortly.

"Then you suspect——"

"I suspect nothing but what *Scotland Yard* can easily discover. If John is determined to have things published abroad he must take the consequences. One had better not mention mere 'suspicions.' "

"I am not sure that you aren't right," Arthur agreed with a nod. Both the younger men were looking injured as John knew they would.

"But you've got quite the wrong idea about Turner!" he said; "he's not a bit the conventional detective. I never heard of his doing anything specially brilliant in his life. He's just a plain straightforward little fellow without any pretences at all."

Arthur raised his eyebrows at this faint praise, which John himself next moment felt to be rather tactless; but he went on bravely: "It's like this. This business is going to involve me in I don't know what legalities and worries, and I want someone at my elbow who'll do all the spade-work for me. There'll be lots that you and Ernest can do later on and I know you both will. But I want an outsider, some one who isn't too closely connected with us all. I'm poor Harold's executor, you know. He made a will when the date of his marriage to Muriel was fixed, and he's left everything to her. It's going to be horribly difficult altogether; but I could explain better to an outsider, I think."

"John, have you really thought of what all this will mean for Muriel?" Ernest burst out. "How her name will be dragged in? How she'll be questioned? It seems to me it would do better after all if I were to risk things and give a certificate——"

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"No, old fellow, I can't allow you to do that," John said, putting his arm on his shoulders. "We've got to do the right thing and go through with it all now."

"But why this hurry? Why not wait and consider——"

"There should be no more delay, you know, Dr. Cathcart," Arthur said.

"But there's this girl, this Miss Brown. What's to be done with her?"

"Heavens, I'd forgotten her!" John exclaimed; "I suppose she'd better not leave the house just yet, Arthur?"

"I think *Scotland Yard* would prefer she should stay until it arrived."

"Let me think; let me think. It's cruel to keep the poor thing there alone. Ernest, all seems quiet upstairs. Will you go and take Mrs. Smith's place and ask Mrs. Smith to come down and sit with Miss Brown in the dining-room for a while? You might give Muriel a bromide or something if she needs it. You'll find some in the medicine chest. Or read to her. Only don't let her talk. But you'll know what to do for the best, of course."

"Shall I?" Ernest asked with a rather ironic lift of his brows.

"Of course you will; and she'll obey you from force of habit seeing that you doctored her as a child." John spoke with such affectionate heartiness that one at least of his hearers was touched, and Arthur Bertram said quickly:

"And what can I do for you, Uncle John?"

"You have your car here?"

"Yes; it's outside."

"Then I'll ring up *Scotland Yard* at once and if I get Turner I'll tell him you're starting to fetch him. If he should

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not be there when you get there then find out where he is and get hold of him somehow. Ring me up if it's really hopeless ; I shall be here."

"Here, John ? " Ernest put in. " You're not going to stay alone in this room ? "

"Yes : that is what I am going to do."

"I don't think that's right," Ernest said. "It's I who ought to stay. You go up to Muriel. Don't you agree, Bertram, that I'm the one who ought to be here ? "

"I do," Arthur said tentatively, not wishing to embarrass his Uncle again.

"No," John said, determined ; "I shan't move from this room. Ernest can do nothing for the poor fellow now. It's my house ; I'll take the responsibility."

"But I've made no detailed examination," Ernest protested. "Your man will blame me ; he'll think me a fool."

"I'll explain everything," John said. "Arthur, be off. I'm going to ring up the Yard now. Ernest, please go to Muriel and send Mrs. Smith down to me."

"You're determined I shall do nothing ! " Ernest said bitterly and went upstairs as he spoke. John went to the telephone and by the time he had finished with it Mrs. Smith was by his side.

"How is she ? "

"A little quieter now, sir, and I hope Dr. Cathcart will give her something to send her to sleep."

"But not for too long," John said. "When Arthur comes back I should like him to take you and her back to his home for the night if it's allowed. Could you manage to be ready ? "

"Mr. Arthur has gone for the police, sir ? " she ventured.

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"To Scotland Yard to fetch Mr. Turner. You remember Mr. Turner, don't you, Mrs. Smith?"

"Yes, sir, very well. Oh, I'm glad it's him that's coming!" with relief in every feature. "And I can be ready to go with Miss Muriel to Beckenham as you say."

"And what about cook and Margaret? Are they in?"

"No, sir; they're not back from the cinema yet."

"I suppose they'll be in, though, at any minute now," John said, looking at his watch. "You'll hear them perhaps and be able to tell them—tell them as little as you can. Perhaps you could even send them out again for the rest of the evening?"

"I will, sir. But you?"

"Nannie, I want the house to be as empty as possible and as quiet," he said, giving her her old title. "I want to be alone now for a bit in the studio—quite alone, you understand, until Inspector Turner comes. But there's that poor Miss Brown in the dining-room and she may be fainting by this time with shock and fright. Tell her I'll see her presently and that I'm afraid she can't leave the house until Mr. Bertram returns. I don't know what the formalities are, but I expect the Inspector will want just to see her. I'll release her the first moment I can, and I'll speak to her of course before she goes. Get her some tea, or wine—anything you like. Do you think you can manage that, Nannie?"

Mrs. Smith nodded. "I'll do my very best, sir," she said, and her eyes studied his face.

"You're taking a huge load off me," John said gratefully, meeting them, then turned back once more and re-entered the studio, shutting and locking the door.

For a time he paced from end to end of the familiar,

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much-loved room which had suddenly grown strange to him, and while he paced he turned and returned in his mind the happenings of the last few crowded hours—every event of which now seemed charged with a horrible and tragic significance. Every event! Every word he might have said. He thought of the luncheon-party, trying to recall the speech and action of each member of it, dwelling on looks and tones. How could he know these people so intimately and yet know so little of them? Harold, Ernest, Miss Brown, his own daughter . . . could he now guess at what had been in the heart of even one of them? Even Muriel? Where had she been all the afternoon? Or Miss Brown, what part had she played? What was it that Ernest suspected? Was there something in Harold's life which he had never told them? And Harold himself, with all that wild buffoonery; had there been some significance beneath it all? When he spoke of wearing masks, of having no money and no friends—had he all the time been meditating this horrible deed?

"No!" John cried aloud to the silence; "I don't believe it. I'll never believe it. He wouldn't have done it that way. Not cruelly and deliberately with Muriel looking on. No; I won't believe it."

And with the thought came a pang of remorse as he remembered that all this time he had been alone in the room with the dead man whose cause he was prepared to defend, but whose lifeless body lay now ignored and uncared for almost at his feet.

Taking a strip of delicate silk from the dais he drew near to it and looked down.

"Poor Harold, poor fellow, I wish I had liked him better," he said, the tears starting to his eyes; and going down on his

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knees he laid his hand on the dead fingers which so short a time ago had been so strong, so able. "What was it, old fellow?" he whispered, bending over him.

The dead face, which had lost its first convulsed look of agony, stared blankly upwards, but in its stiffening lines John seemed still to see an expression of surprise and bewilderment . . . bewilderment.

"No, I'll never believe you meant it," he protested. "It's been some horrible mistake, and I'll clear it all up—I swear I will! I swear it!"

The last remains of life and humanity were fading from the features, and the light from the window now fell more faintly, but it seemed to John's wrought fancy as though the face relaxed slightly, and a more tranquil look began to settle on its stillness. "I swear I'll clear it all up!" he repeated, then took the silken drapery and threw it over the silent form.

CHAPTER III

RECAPITULATORY

It was nearly six o'clock when Arthur Bertram's car was heard and John came out of the studio and went to open the front door. There was not a sound in the house. Upstairs and below stairs and on the ground floor all was still—as still as the studio itself where death was. A brisk, smart-looking man of middle height jumped out of the car and ran up the steps, and in a moment he and John had grasped each other's hands. It was easy to understand the friendship between them, for though there was no special mark of outward resemblance—Mr. Turner being the younger by ten years, and of ordinary and indeterminate colouring ; there was a likeness, of a kind. A simplicity and directness marked each of them ; they would look at things from a very similar standpoint, and even where they differed would be able to understand the reason of the differing. Two such men could meet after a separation and take up their friendship without any sense of having grown apart. Nor was either of them of the kind to be moved by considerations of social standings ; for though Mr. Turner habitually addressed John as ' Sir,' this seemed in him a mere grammatical convention, a comma or a full-stop to punctuate his speech. On both sides there was perfect openness and confidence.

" Thank God you were able to come," John said.

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"I'm glad enough I was free at the moment, sir," said the other, "but I *am* grieved to hear of all this trouble. Mr. Bertram's been telling me a little about it. Suicide, is it? And Miss Muriel's sweetheart, too! What a bad business."

"One moment, Turner," said John; "I want to talk to you; but let me say something to Mr. Bertram first. Arthur, can I ask one more thing of you? I've treated you pretty much like a hired chauffeur already—but you know how things are."

"I'm only longing to do what I can, Uncle John! I have to get some more petrol and then I'll be ready for anything."

"Well, suppose you get it now—and get something to eat at the same time. Then ring up your mother and tell her that I want her to let you bring Muriel back with you to-night. Mrs. Smith, too, perhaps."

Arthur's face brightened. "I was hoping you'd let me do that!" he said.

"But give them warning of what's happened and let them know it's doubtful. It's for Turner to decide. And there's poor Miss Brown, too. Could you run her round to wherever she lives when you come back?" Arthur looked less pleased at this commission, but agreed with a nod. "Of course with the same proviso," John added with a glance at his friend. "Turner must tell me what's the right thing to do. Do have something to eat, Arthur. You've had no tea and it may be late before you get off to-night."

The young man nodded again, saying: "Oh yes—food for bus and beast!" and turning at once was soon out of sight.

"Now come in, Turner," John said, "come into the studio: the poor fellow's still here, of course."

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The Inspector followed him into the room and shut the door while with a gesture John showed him the motionless figure. In silence the other man went over and knelt beside it, gently throwing aside the silken covering. It seemed long before he spoke. He passed his finger-tips lightly over the face and form, touched the long, stiffened fingers, considered thoughtfully the surroundings, stood up and seemed to consider them again and again, and at last, with a sigh turned to John. "No doubt about it, of course," he said; "dead these two hours, and poison, too. Now, sir, tell me all you can. Was it suicide?"

"I want to tell you all about it, Turner. I want you to know everything, because I'm absolutely convinced there's something behind it that we haven't understood. I don't believe it was suicide in the ordinary sense of the word."

Mr. Turner looked at him quickly and then looked searchingly round the room. "Sit down, Turner," John said and they dropped into two chairs on opposite sides of the fireplace.

"I want to tell you about poor Nelson, first of all," John began. "I suppose we've known him some nine months altogether. Actually known him, I mean; I'd heard of him and come across him as a painter, of course, and seen his pictures. People thought very well of him, and he was making a great name for himself, as they say. But I actually met him at Ernest Cathcart's rooms. You remember Dr. Cathcart?"

"Yes, sir; quite distinctly. I've seen him here more than once."

"The two were friends, it seems, though I had never heard Ernest mention him. But that is Ernest's way. He's

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reserved about his affairs and keeps all his acquaintances shut up in different compartments as it were—like his drugs ! Never discusses them or mixes them. I always suspect that Harold saw Muriel somewhere with Ernest and me, and fell in love with her at sight, and then forced Ernest to arrange a meeting. I'm sure he'd never do it of his own accord."

" Dr. Cathcart struck me as a rather melancholy type, I remember."

" Yes, yes : he has that diffident self-distrustful manner. And that made him an odd friend for Nelson. But it seems that Harold got some injury to his right hand in the war and was in a terrible fright lest he should lose the use of it : it meant everything to him, of course. And Ernest put it right for him and that was the beginning of the friendship. Harold thought him a miracle-worker, simply swore by him."

" Dr. Cathcart's clever in his profession ? "

" I believe he's clever in every way ; but he doesn't practise as a doctor now. He's been engaged in scientific and research-work for the last few years ; but I'm no judge of such things, and he hasn't published any results so far. He used to attend Muriel when she was a child and she was a great pet of his then ; though I don't think he has ever cared for her in any other way. You see we'd hardly realised she was more than a child still," he stopped and sighed. " And she was bored with him—these young things haven't much patience ! But about Harold. He was just the other way about. A great big fellow, as you see, and noisy, always laughing and shouting and ragging about. A little too noisy, perhaps, for my taste," and he sighed again.

" You didn't care for the engagement then, sir ? "

" I hadn't anything against him," John answered ; " but

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he was over thirty and had seen a good deal more of life than Muriel had, and I wished she had waited a bit. But they fell madly in love with one another and there was no peace until I allowed them to be engaged. Harold had some private means and was apparently on his way to make a fortune by his pictures: so I couldn't object on that score. I did hope they would have waited a year, and I tried to make that a condition at first; but he was one of those masterful overpowering fellows,—and Muriel's not accustomed to be thwarted. They wouldn't listen to me. The wedding was actually fixed for July and they were looking about for a house."

"Then there was no money trouble to . . . to account for . . ." the Inspector glanced towards the dead man whose form was again covered by the silken drapery.

"No; he was extremely frank about it all, went into everything with me. Even made his will and appointed me his executor."

"And they were happy together?"

"In a way, yes. Yes, I'm sure of it. But they had rows sometimes . . . You'd expect that of course with two people of their sort. Harold used to tease Muriel and she couldn't bear it and used to fly out at him. I sometimes wished she would do what she threatened when she was angry,—end it all and have done with him. But they had their furious reconciliations, too; and you mustn't think I actually disliked the poor fellow. He was big and generous and good-hearted. Yes, I'm sure he was good-hearted."

The Inspector nodded silently: perhaps he smiled: perhaps he thought of the days when John, as a special constable, used to complain that he never came across an actual "drunk and disorderly——"

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"Well now about this special trouble. I noticed things were wrong to-day ; but I don't know . . . perhaps now that I look back . . . they may have been strained for some little time. I hardly know what to think—but I'm rather afraid it may have begun about this girl, Miss Brown. She was a film-actress, Phyllis Brown—have you heard of her ? "

"I couldn't say, sir, until I've seen her," the Inspector replied discreetly, but with increased attention.

"You'll see her presently. Harold met her at an Arts ball of sorts and came home raving about her. He was like that ; always mad-keen about something or other and never noticing what other people thought of him. Perhaps Muriel didn't like it ; but that never seemed to strike him and it certainly never struck me, either. The next thing was that he must paint her. She wasn't a model, you understand, and wouldn't have posed in the ordinary way ; but he wanted her for a picture of Cleopatra. She was just that type ; very striking-looking. I'll show you the pictures in a minute. I think the girl herself made some objection at first, but he would have his way—he always did. As she didn't seem to want to come to his studio he finally compromised by getting me to have her at mine, and he suggested too that I should paint her at the same time as he did."

Mr. Turner got up and walked first to John's easel before which he stood for some time, then to the picture which still lay where it had fallen.

"All this was entirely Mr. Nelson's idea ? " he asked at last.

"Oh yes, entirely : I had never seen the girl before. That was the beginning of her coming to the house ; and it may have been—I don't know—the beginning of more than

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that. You see we treated her more or less as a guest ; she used to have tea with us and so on. And Harold was always raving about her . . . perhaps Muriel may have misunderstood him. At any rate she seems to have taken a dislike to Miss Brown."

" You think there wasn't any real reason ? "

" It never occurred to me that there could be. I thought Harold just admired her as a fine study."

" And the girl herself ? What was she like ? "

" Why she is so silent, I could never make out. She seemed to me ordinary enough. But it's possible Muriel had suspicions of her. I'm afraid she had . . . after what happened to-day——"

" Yes, sir," eagerly and sharply.

" I'm thinking of my party at lunch," John said slowly. " It was like this : they were all four here, Muriel and Harold, Miss Brown and Ernest ; and they struck me as being all the time at sixes and sevens, as Mrs. Smith says. Not quarrelling exactly . . . I don't know how to describe it . . . but talking with a double meaning. Especially Harold——"

For the first time Mr. Turner took out a note-book and pencil. " This is rather important, sir, if you please. Tell me exactly what you remember . . . Wouldn't this be quite a short time before——" he glanced at the dead man.

" Yes, that's what I keep thinking and trying to make out. It began with something about Dr. Cathcart's research work, about an antidote to poison-gas, and how it could be used for gas-masks in war. Mr. Nelson was in one of his wild moods, laughing and shouting and chaffing us all. He said everyone of us wore a mask . . . that sort of thing. It was a way anyone might have talked——"

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" Yes, sir ; do you feel it was all said in joke ? "

" I did think so. But there certainly seemed an edge to it which wasn't a bit like Harold. I felt it was forced or too personal . . . was making everyone uncomfortable ; I was sure Dr. Cathcart couldn't like his work talked of in that way ; he's so sensitive about his personal affairs, and hates publicity. And Harold has always been so keen about his discoveries, urging him on and predicting all sorts of fame for him. So I tried to change the subject. There had been an idea that Muriel and he should come with me in the afternoon to see a house they thought of taking, and I began to speak of that asking them if they really meant to come."

" And did they ? "

" Apparently not ; though I had never been told of a change. Muriel seemed vexed at the mere mention of it, and Harold started fooling worse than ever. Said all of a sudden that he had no money and couldn't afford a house of any kind ; then asked us all if we'd lend him money,—I didn't know and I don't know now what he was driving at : there never was any knowing when he was in that mood. Finally he pretended to burst out crying ; and I must confess that by that time I didn't care what he meant. I was thoroughly annoyed with him."

The Inspector looked steadily at what he had written and considered it. " That sort of high spirits and play-acting you're describing, sir," he said at last, " it's not so uncommon or . . . unusual as you'd suppose when—when——"

" I know : I can quite well imagine that. I know that everything he said and did might look like it. But just hear me out. I want to tell you everything and then see if we can clear it up. I can't help it, Turner ; I've got it in my heart

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that I *must* clear it up. I feel as though that poor fellow's spirit were here now, urging me on."

"Go on, sir. I'll do all I can to help you. Tell me the rest."

"I had had enough of it, so I rang for Mrs. Smith to bring coffee; I imagined they'd all restrain themselves before her. And when she came she suggested our going into the garden, and I thought I might break up the party if we did; that they'd drift off pretty soon and I could have a word with Muriel. So we went out, and in so far as they all separated there was peace for a little while . . ."

"Only for a little while?"

"Well, there was another small upset. Miss Brown came up to me and asked me if I should want her to sit again that afternoon. There had been this idea you see that Harold and Muriel and I should go and look at that house . . ."

"Miss Brown had been sitting to you in the morning then?"

"Oh yes, right up to lunch."

"Did anyone else come into the studio at all during the morning?"

"No one at all, except, of course, Harold. No one ever comes while I'm working. Muriel never dreams of such a thing; never enters the place until tea-time, when I sometimes have a visitor and she pours out tea for us."

"Yes, I understand. Go on, sir, please. Miss Brown asked you whether she should come."

"And I was going to say 'No'; I hoped she would go then, and I could get Harold to be reasonable and explain himself. But he suddenly called out across the garden that *he* should want her, that he should be painting all the

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afternoon. That meant that all idea of seeing the house was off. I don't know whether he and Muriel had arranged that between themselves, but she seemed angrier than ever at his way of putting it, and when Ernest asked her if we should be having tea at the studio she called out in the same way that neither she nor I would be near the place again to-day."

"But that was not so?"

"No. Directly Ernest had gone I took her out of hearing and tried to smooth her down. I supposed she was angry that Harold wanted to spend the afternoon alone, painting Miss Brown; so I told her I should alter that and would be there instead of him. And I advised her to go for a walk and come in for tea at half-past four as usual. My idea was that Harold shouldn't come to the studio before tea, either, and that they should stay after Miss Brown had gone and have their wretched quarrel out and have done with it."

"I'd like to get this as clear as you can, please, sir. Miss Franklin seems to have thought Mr. Nelson was attracted by this Miss Brown. Now did anyone else—Mrs. Smith or Dr. Cathcart notice anything of this sort?"

"I don't know about Mrs. Smith; I believe Dr. Cathcart did."

"He did? Had he spoken of it?"

"Not actually in words; but his manner implied it."

"You have no doubt at all on that point?"

"No. He took a dislike to Miss Brown from the moment he saw her. Used to edge away from her as if she were a snake. And when Harold talked of her he would shut his mouth and look contemptuous. He may even have spoken to Harold on the subject and Harold may have resented it and been paying him out by sneering at his work."

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"Will you go on, please, sir? You were speaking of Miss Franklin. Did she go out as you suggested?"

"She ran straight away from me to the house. She had to pass Harold on the way and he stopped her for a minute; got up and made a ridiculous bow and handed her something which she snatched from him. Then she dashed in at the side-door and must have dashed through the house and out at the front-door, for the two doors seemed to slam at the same moment."

"Have you any idea what it was he gave her?"

"None at all; a tiny parcel wrapped in white paper."

"Any particular shape?"

"I couldn't see at all, except that it was small and white."

"Did you speak to Mr. Nelson after that?"

"Yes. I said to him much what I had said to Muriel and told him of the arrangement I had made with her for the afternoon."

"And he said . . ."

"Oh, he shrugged his shoulders . . . just the same sort of clowning that he'd been at all the time. But I made out that he would come to the studio at tea-time and not before. His last words were something about telling Cleopatra to leave her asp behind for him."

"Meaning Miss Brown, by Cleopatra?"

"Yes, he always called her that."

"And this asp, what might that be?"

"Absolute nonsense; nothing at all."

"And Miss Brown, where was she all this time?"

"Either walking about the garden or sitting under the mulberry tree."

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"Would she have seen and heard anything of what passed?"

"Perhaps; I can hardly say."

"And did she stay straight on all afternoon?"

"No. When I told her of the arrangements she said she would go for a stroll until three. It was then about a quarter past two. She was back on the stroke of the hour."

"And would she be admitted, or could she walk in as she liked?"

"Oh no; Mrs. Smith always let her in by the front door."

"Would the side door be latched or could anyone come in that way?"

"Always latched, unless we were in the garden."

"Go on, sir, please."

"I was painting from three to half-past four: she and I alone in the studio. Then Muriel came in and Mrs. Smith brought the tea-things."

"And stayed?"

"No; she went back to her den opposite. She would be there the whole afternoon—always at hand if we wanted her."

"I remember that. Now, sir, go slow. Tell me exactly how it all happened."

"I had just finished painting when Mr. Nelson walked in——"

"Did you notice his look then? Was he still in the same spirits?"

"I did look up, but I hardly noticed him. He called out something about our all meeting again like the witches in *Macbeth*, and then he shouted to Miss Brown not to move because her position was perfect and he wanted to get some

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effect ; and he went to his easel and began to paint. Miss Brown got down after a minute or two ; Muriel was pouring out tea and Miss Brown took a cup from her and put it on this little table by Harold's side. Whether he tasted it or not I don't know : I had my back to him. Suddenly I heard him cry out, and he fell, full-length here just as you see him, bringing the easel and the table with him. He has never moved since."

" You got Dr. Cathcart at once ? "

" Mrs. Smith rang him up at his laboratory which is just round the corner. He was here within five minutes I should say."

" And Mr. Nelson was dead then ? "

" I'm sure he was, though Ernest wouldn't tell us at once. I want to explain to you about Dr. Cathcart, Turner. He's had a perfectly horrible time amongst us all. You see he left Harold in perfect health at two o'clock, and was summoned suddenly at half-past four, and came here to find him dead. He must have expected he would be in the studio alone with Miss Brown or possibly with her and Mrs. Smith, and he found us all here . . . and almost before he could speak Muriel cried out that she was sure Harold was dead and that it was all *her* fault . . . and then she fainted, and Mrs. Smith and I were trying to get her and Miss Brown out of the room when my nephew Arthur Bertram came in on us all. As things turned out it was a godsend that he did ; but you see what the confusion must have been. And I've done nothing but drive the lot of them hither and thither since then. . . . Dr. Cathcart hasn't had a chance of doing things in order, I expect. You'll go soft with him, won't you, Turner ? "

" Why, yes, sir ; of course I will. But if Mr. Nelson was

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dead when he arrived—and as it's prussic-acid, he must have been—why, there wasn't much he could have done."

"No; but I've hurt his professional pride, and he feels injured that I sent for you and didn't give him the chance of talking it all over with me—that sort of thing. He'll be jealous of you, Turner, I know, and I want you to smooth him down and conciliate him if you can."

"I understand, sir. I'll do my best."

"There's one other thing I ought to perhaps have told you," John said, hesitating. "Something Muriel said to me when I spoke to her about quarrelling with Harold in public. I forget her words, but it was to the effect that she had done with Harold for good and all, and *had told him so.*"

"Did you take that seriously?"

"No, Turner, I did not. She has said the same thing before to me, and I daresay she has said it to him. But I don't believe he gave any more importance to it than I did."

"You had some reason for thinking he did not?"

"Only his manner. I don't think he was taking her seriously at all. That was the trouble of it all," and he sighed.

"Well, Turner?"

"It's a strange story in some ways, sir."

"You feel that?"

"Yes, sir; there's something strange about it, but I don't see exactly where at the moment. It all looks so straightforward." Mr. Turner sat thoughtful for two or three minutes during which John watched him; then he got up and walked slowly towards the fallen easel and from there seemed to be taking in the room and all its contents.

"Nothing's been moved since he fell?"

"Practically nothing. I could not swear to every detail

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when there was that confusion in getting Muriel out. And Miss Brown fetched her things from the models-room there and took them to the dining-room. She's there now with Mrs. Smith, and Ernest is upstairs with Muriel."

Mr. Turner walked to the tiny adjoining room used by the models. It was empty and bare. Returning to the easel he looked down on the floor and touched a tiny spot of red.

"Paint!" John said, and then with a faint smile: "Clues? Oh, Turner, and I said you weren't a conventional detective! I fancy I saw a cigarette-end about just now."

Mr. Turner smiled, too, then after another pause said: "Mr. Nelson smoked a pipe?"

"Yes."

"Had he, do you know, one made entirely of wood—a cherry-wood, or one of those old-fashioned corn-cobs, and used he to chew the mouth-piece?"

"He did that to every pipe he possessed, and I should think he had one of every description ever made. An extraordinary collection. But why do you ask?"

"There are tiny splinters of wood between the teeth, and if we could find out whether they are impregnated with the acid, that might help us to discover how he took the stuff."

"Has he a pipe on him at the moment?"

"None at all; and no bottle near . . ."

"No, Dr. Cathcart was very much mystified about that. He thought it must have rolled away in some corner as he fell."

"We must find it," the Inspector said, and began to search as he spoke. John followed him and the two men examined the room on hands and knees; but no bottle was to be found.

"It couldn't have been caught up in anyone's dress or drapery?"

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"It doesn't seem likely, but I'll ask Mrs. Smith and Miss Brown."

"Or thrown out of the window?"

"The windows only open from the top, and they were shut then."

Mr. Turner went to the fire-place.

"Nothing here," John said; "except this end of a spill. One of Harold's untidy ways. He *would* light his pipes with a piece of paper at the gas fire, though I've begged him to use the matches. Well, here's a perfect reproduction of his thumb-print—if that's any clue," and he handed the piece of burnt paper to the Inspector, who turned it absently between his fingers.

"The poison may have been swallowed in a capsule, of course," he said; "then there would be nothing to find. But we'll make sure about a bottle first. I suppose it couldn't have been kicked or rolled into the hall if the door was opened?"

"Come and see," John said, and led the way; but almost as he put his foot over the threshold Mrs. Smith appeared at the door of the dining-room; then, carefully shutting it behind her, crossed to his side and whispered, "It's Miss Brown, sir; she says she won't stay a moment longer, and I don't know what to do about it!" She looked hot and distressed.

"Oh, poor Miss Brown! I don't wonder. I'll speak to her in one moment. Just come here, Mrs. Smith."

"She'll be off, sir."

"Then I'll go at once," John said. "Keep close to me, Turner," and he went to the dining-room.

"Oh, Miss Brown, how can I apologise to you?" he began

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instantly. "You've been treated most inconsiderately by us all. I can't tell you how sorry I am."

"I want to go at once," Miss Brown said in trembling tones. "I don't know why I should be asked to stay"—she stood by the table, her white face almost ashen, her eyes black and wide with agitation.

"Do try to forgive us," John said. "It's been such a dreadful business. I know what a shock it must be for you . . . how it must have upset you——"

"*You don't know!*" she began with a sob which she tried to choke down; "but I want to go now—to go at once!"

"I'll only keep you a minute longer," John said; "and there's my nephew coming back with his car: he'll take you wherever you wish to go. I've just one thing to ask you. We've been trying to find something . . . a small bottle that might possibly have got caught up in your things as you carried them here——"

"No, no, I should have seen it. I don't know anything about it. Mr. Franklin—I can't stay . . . I have . . . have an engagement. I've got to go at once!"

"I quite understand, and you shan't be kept any longer," John said, throwing a questioning glance back at the inspector, who in reply just formed a word with his lips.

"Ah, yes," John said, taking out his pocket-book; "but, Miss Brown," in a lower voice, "Mr. Nelson must have been in your debt. The sittings were a business matter, and you must let me settle it. Only tell me where I may send the cheque, give me your address, you know, and——"

"That's nothing!" she cried, more and more agitated; "I don't want it . . . don't want the money.—You won't need the address."

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"I'm so distressed to keep worrying you," John said, troubled and perplexed; "but I'm afraid we must have it. . . . There may be formalities, you see—legal formalities in connection with all this——"

"Legal formalities!" she cried. "What do you mean?"

"There—there may be an inquest, for instance."

"That can have nothing to do with me."

"Oh, I hope not; I sincerely hope not. But there's a chance you might have to attend."

"I couldn't do that. It's impossible. I . . . I'm going abroad."

"I'll do all I can to get you excused," John said, catching another word from the inspector's lips. "I hope it'll be quite a formal matter, anyway. Perhaps you could put your visit off for a day or two——"

"No—no, I can't!" she cried. "I've got my passport. I can't put it off for any reason at all. . . . I *can't*!"

"Well, just tell me where to write and I'll let you know the moment anything has been arranged."

She stood for a moment trembling, leaning against the table, her breath coming in sobs, her face once more a mask. Then seizing her handbag she opened it, took from it a letter, snatched out the contents from the envelope and threw this empty on the table. "There!" she cried; "now let me go. Let me go at once!"

John took up her scarf and put it gently round her. "But will you be all right?" he said in concerned tones. "Won't you let me send Dr. Cathcart with you, or Mrs. Smith?"

"No! no!" she gasped, and rushing past him was through the hall and at the front-door in a flash; then calling, "To

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Albion Street Station ! As fast as you can ! ” sprang into the waiting car.

John stood staring after her, breathless and amazed. “ What on earth do you make of that, Turner ? ”

Mr. Turner stepped into the room, and picking up the envelope studied it, then without a word held it out to John, who read in a well-known sprawling handwriting the address :

Miss Phyllis Brown,
C/o Mrs. Paxton,
14 Laburnum Villas,
Nile Street,
Battersea.

“ Written yesterday,” John said, examining the post-mark. “ And Harold Nelson’s writing.”

“ I thought it might be,” Mr. Turner said quietly.

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CHAPTER IV

THE FIND

JOHN roused himself with an effort ; Mrs. Smith was again at his side.

" Mrs. Smith, did you hear what I said about a bottle ? You haven't noticed it anywhere ? " he said, turning to her.

" No, sir ; shall I look for it ? "

" Please search Miss Muriel's things. See whether it got caught up in any way, or dropped, perhaps, on the stairs or in her room. And shake out your own things, too," he added, smiling.

" Yes, sir. I'll go now."

" One minute, Mrs. Smith ! Turner, if she finds nothing, will there be any objection to the child going back with Arthur Bertram to my sister's house at Beckenham ? I want to get her out of this as soon as possible."

" Why, certainly, Mr. Franklin ; there'll be no objection at all."

" And may Mrs. Smith go with her, for the night at least ? "

" Yes, sir ; though I shall be glad to have Mrs. Smith back," the inspector said. They were old friends.

" So shall I," John agreed. " I'll go down to-morrow to see them ; and if Muriel's fit to be left Mrs. Smith shall come back with me. Search everything, Nannie, and then pack

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Muriel's things and get her ready to start." Mrs. Smith was by now half-way up the stairs. "And ask Dr. Cathcart to come down to us, please," John called after her.

"Now, Turner, you'll remember what I said about him, won't you? I know he'll be sore that I've pushed him out of the way when he wanted to help. I know he'll be surly and difficult with you."

The inspector smiled. "And you, sir? What about yourself? Haven't you been chivvied and worried, too?"

"You're thinking of that girl," John said. "What did you make of all that, Turner?"

"I haven't begun to think about it yet," the inspector replied composedly.

Dr. Cathcart now ran downstairs and joined them in the hall.

"Ernest, old fellow, I've been apologising to Mr. Turner for my behaviour to you," John said, laying his hand on his arm. "I've told him I deserve to be reported to the British Medical Council for interference with medical etiquette, and that I'm completely at your mercy. By the way, you remember Mr. Turner, don't you?"

Ernest, who wore exactly the reserved and distant expression John expected, bowed to the inspector, but did not offer his hand.

"I'm depending a great deal on your help, Dr. Cathcart," Mr. Turner said cordially.

"If I can be of any use . . . of course," Ernest replied stiffly; "but it seems a perfectly straightforward case."

"Come inside the studio until the women are ready," John said, keeping his hand where he had laid it, and the three men stood just on the threshold, listening half-unconsciously to the

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only sounds in the house, the movements in the room above where Mrs. Smith was making ready for departure.

"I hear you were puzzled as I was, Dr. Cathcart," the inspector went on, "not to find any bottle or means by which the poison could have been taken."

"You've found nothing? I gave a look round, of course; but have you made a thorough search?"

"We have, sir; and I've been searching this hall, too, in case anything had been kicked out of the room, or caught in anyone's clothes. But we haven't come on anything. I can only think he must have had a capsule on him."

"That seems the only possible alternative."

"You will have noticed, of course, sir, that between the teeth——"

"Yes, I know what you mean. I noticed that, too. But I have had so little time to go into anything thoroughly."

"Mr. Franklin explained all that, sir, and I have to thank you for a great deal of forbearance. But there's something else I've been wondering. Mr. Nelson wasn't left-handed, was he?"

"Oh no, certainly not; why?"

"If you'll just look at his picture here, sir," Mr. Turner said, motioning Ernest to make a step or two into the studio, "you'll see that he must actually have had his brush in his right hand when he fell, for here's a long streak of wet paint across the picture which could only have been made by the brush. That would mean, wouldn't it, that whatever he put in his mouth, he would have put in with his left hand?"

"It must have been so," Ernest said slowly, looking at the picture, which he had never admired, and at the wavering streak of yellowish-white paint that now scarred it.

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"Nothing has been moved, Mr. Franklin tells me," the inspector added.

Ernest, whose ears were evidently intent on the sounds upstairs, moved back to the door, but looked round to say, with stilted precision, "Mr. Franklin forgets. He and I did move one or two things before I remembered that there must probably be an inquest. Let me see; this table had been overturned, and he set it up again and I myself picked up one or two of the paint-tubes that were in danger of being trodden on. I also put his palette on the table, and his paint-brush in the turpentine here with the others. I'm sorry; but possibly it can be identified."

"I could identify it anywhere," John put in quickly.

"It's no matter at all, sir," the inspector said; "I have already examined every one of the brushes, as well as the palette, and there's not a trace of poison about any of them."

Ernest returned to the doorway.

"A bottle would have fallen somewhere, if he had it in his hand," the inspector went on, his eyes travelling quickly to and fro; "and if he had carried a capsule one would almost think it would have been wrapped in paper . . . yet there's not a sign of either in his pockets. It's rather strange—don't you think so, sir?"

"I can't think now," Ernest said wearily; "let me have time."

"Yes, yes, sir, I understand; you shall have all the time you want," the inspector said. "I only wanted to put it before you, as a doctor. Now there's Mr. Bertram back with his car, and the ladies will be coming down. We'll talk again when they're gone."

Arthur Bertram, alert and ready as ever, ran up the

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front-door steps next moment and was admitted by his uncle. "Is Muriel coming back with me?" was his first question.

"Yes; she'll be down in a moment. But tell us about your journey. Was the poor thing all right? Was there anyone to meet her? What happened?"

"Well, I drove like mad to Albion Street Station, as she seemed in such a fume to be there; but she sat like an image when she was once inside the car,—never moved till we got quite close up to the station. Then she called out, 'Stop!' and without a single word to me jumped out and rushed across the street and round the corner of another, and all I could see was that a girl about her own age ran forward to meet her, as if she expected her, and she and this Miss What's-her-name flew into each other's arms. Then they vanished and I saw no more of them."

"What an odd business. She didn't go to the station itself then?"

"As far as I could see—no," Arthur answered; "but I didn't wait long. I thought you might want me."

"I hope she's all right," John said uneasily. "I feel partly responsible for her, and this must have been a most terrible shock for the poor girl. What do you think, any of you?"

"She looks to me a person who knows her own mind pretty well," Arthur said.

"I don't like her going off like that," John sighed.

Ernest looked rather contemptuous; but the inspector put in easily: "We'll look her up, sir."

"Then can I be off again?" Arthur said, as more sounds were heard upstairs.

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"I'll detain you and Dr. Cathcart for a couple of seconds only, sir," the inspector said, stepping forward.

"What! finger-prints?—a personally-conducted search?" Arthur cried.

"No, sir, just a form; just to make sure that nothing got caught up in anything you're wearing," Mr. Turner replied.

"Begin with me while you're about it, Turner," John demanded.

The inspector ran practised hands over his clothes and quite composedly saw his friend turn out his pockets. John then stepped into the hall to wait for his daughter, and Arthur, who submitted to the examination with amusement, hardly concealed under an exaggerated solemnity, took the opportunity of saying in a low voice, "What's all this bunkum for, inspector? You know as well as I do that it was just a case of suicide."

"Suicide or misadventure," the inspector answered.

Ernest had endured the search with the indifference of a lay-figure, and now joined John, ready to rush upstairs at the first glimpse of the women.

"And there's the man who could tell you the reason," Arthur murmured.

"I think that's very possible, sir. But Dr. Cathcart's not inclined to speak as yet."

"I rather admire him for that. This fellow Nelson was his friend, and Dr. Cathcart's not the man to blurt out all his friend's secrets the moment he is dead."

"No, sir. Only probably they'll all have to come out in the end."

"Ah, that's a different thing. *That's* up to you!"

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"Mr. Bertram," the inspector said, detaining him and speaking very decidedly, "will you yourself be very careful for a day or two what you say about this business? If you can help it, don't discuss it with anyone at present. Not even with Mrs. Smith or Miss Franklin."

"I understand. I'll obey you," Arthur said, nodding. "But I think you'll find in the end that it's as I say—a case of suicide, pure and simple."

"Suicide, yes, sir, perhaps. Simple, I don't know."

"Now, inspector, aren't you satisfied in your own mind that it really is suicide?"

"It's Mr. Franklin that I want to satisfy," the inspector said.

There was now a definite sound of steps at the head of the stairs, and Ernest sprang forward to meet Mrs. Smith and Muriel, and a moment after was taking Muriel's arm and speaking to her in the gentle soothing tones he had used to her as a child. From his manner she might still have been one; and childish enough she now looked with every trace of colour gone from her face and her eyes dazed and dark with tears. At the sight of her father she broke from Ernest and ran forward:

"Oh, daddy, is it true . . . is he really dead?"

"Yes, darling, I'm afraid there's no doubt of it," John said, taking her in his arms.

"But why must I go away? Why can't I stay here with you?" she sobbed.

"Because it's better for you, my pet. We can none of us do anything for him now. Try to be a brave girl and not fret too much."

"But mayn't I see him again . . . just once?"

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"No, my poor little dear; better not. It would only upset you."

"Oh, daddy," stammered the poor child. "Ernest says it was an accident, but I *know* it was all my fault. I want to tell you about it . . . tell you what I did."

"Not a word now, my dear; not a word," John said firmly. "To-morrow if you're very good and calm I'll hear what you have to say; but till I come you're not to speak of all this to anyone. You understand that, don't you, sweet-heart? Not a single word."

"Come, Muriel," Ernest said gently. "The car is ready. Don't stay now."

The drug she had been given was already taking effect, and with less trouble than he expected John was able to withdraw himself from her hold and give her over to Ernest, while he himself turned to Mrs. Smith. It was Ernest who saw to the luggage and hung over them to the last, thinking of everything, saying and doing all that was kindest and most helpful, and even in the distress of the moment John could not help saying to himself, "How different he is when he forgets himself! That's the real man! If he could always be like that . . ." and he looked round to see if the inspector were watching, but Mr. Turner was scanning the floor of the hall.

"Thank you, Ernest," John said as the car disappeared once more. "And," he added, "thank Heaven the women have all gone! Mrs. Smith tells me the maids are at a theatre and won't be in till midnight, so we have the house to ourselves. Now let us come in here," and he led the way to the den. "Come, Turner——"

Mr. Turner stood at the door of the studio. "I'd like

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this room locked up, sir," he said. "If there's anything you'd like to get from it, will you take it now? Then I'll ask you for the key, and for your promise that no one, not even yourself, shall enter the place without me, or my permission."

"I've nothing to fetch," John said, but hesitated. "I'd like to pull the blinds down, Turner, and . . . and light some candles."

The Inspector stood still on the threshold and quietly watched him; then as John passed out again, said, "This is the only key to this door, sir?"

"Yes, the only one."

"You have nothing to get from here, Dr. Cathcart?"

"Nothing," Ernest said over his shoulder as he walked into the den.

The inspector locked the door, put the key on a ring which was fastened by a strap to his person, then followed John who had already followed Ernest.

A fire was burning cheerfully in the tiny room and around it three chairs were arranged; while on the table were set out tea-things, a tantalus and glasses, sandwiches and biscuits.

"Witches' work!" John said, and smiled at Mrs. Smith's prescience.

"No tea for you, John!" Ernest said quickly and mixed him a stronger drink; "sit down and have this and then some sandwiches." John obeyed him, more to satisfy the other than himself; then felt almost ashamed of the relief that followed.

"You, too, inspector," Ernest added. The inspector however, chose tea, and Ernest made it and gave it to him, waiting on the pair of them with a neat-handed readiness that John had often noticed and admired.

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"And you yourself, sir?" Mr. Turner said. Ernest took a cup and filled it, but hardly tasted the tea and ate nothing, watching John anxiously and urging him to get out his pipe as soon as he had finished his meal.

"Ah! that's better!" John said at last, with a long breath of relief; and as if he had been waiting for this, Ernest's anxious face relaxed.

"Now, Turner," John went on. "Have you anything to ask us . . . to suggest?"

"I'd be glad if Dr. Carthcart would let me ask him a question or two," the Inspector said.

Ernest's face changed again, but he answered "Yes?" quite courteously.

"What I wanted to know," the inspector began, then stopped suddenly, his eye caught by something. He got up and pointed across the room. "Excuse me, Mr. Franklin, whose coat is that?"

"Oh, that's poor Harold's overcoat," John said, turning round. "I brought it in here for Mrs. Smith to mend."

"At what time did you bring it, sir?"

"At three o'clock, exactly. Long before . . . before Harold came this afternoon. It was in the studio all morning, and I wanted to hang it in the hall, but the tag's broken and Mrs. Smith said she must get a piece of stuff before she could make it firm, so asked me to leave it here."

"She hasn't mended it?"

"She hasn't touched it, I should say. She meant to wait and ask Harold whether he could do without it till to-morrow. That's just where I put it down."

From where he stood Mr. Turner evidently saw something about the coat that startled him. He walked across

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to it, put his hand into a pocket and drew out a tiny bottle wrapped in white paper.

"What is it, Turner?" John said, rising too.

"Stand back a moment, sir; don't touch it. Dr. Cathcart, you see this? You see what it is?"

Ernest went close and stared at it. "But how can it have come *here*?" and John at the same moment repeated, "What is it, Turner?"

Mr. Turner lifted the cork, offered it to Ernest and said, "There's no doubt whatever, is there, Dr. Cathcart? It's prussic-acid?" Ernest nodded, still staring from the bottle to the coat.

"But what can it mean?" John said. "Harold threw his coat down by his easel when he came at ten o'clock this morning, and there it lay all the time and there it was when I went to the studio at three o'clock. Then I brought it here and put it on that exact spot. Harold could not have got at that bottle. He came straight to the studio at half-past four. I heard him. This makes everything more extraordinary than ever."

"It does, sir," the inspector said. "Yet the bottle has been opened, and I think . . . I can't help thinking it was opened in the studio."

"Now, Turner, what on earth makes you think that?"

"Because I found a tiny piece of red sealing-wax on the floor just at the place where Mr. Nelson's easel stood," the inspector said, and showed a red fragment of wax on a shred of white paper. "It was this that made me, all along, so keen to find a bottle. This wax and paper are similar to the ones the chemist has used for wrapping it up."

"Well—then that proves one thing!" John cried. "If

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the bottle has been here all afternoon, Harold can never have poisoned himself with it."

The inspector did not answer this but turned to Ernest. "You see the name of the chemists, sir? Clark and Juxon, quite near here. Do you know anything of them?"

"Oh yes; I know them quite well. I often get my own things from them."

"And did Mr. Nelson ever have any dealings there? Would he be known to them?"

"He certainly would. He got his photographic materials there, and he has sometimes left orders with them for me."

"Then there will be no difficulty in finding out when this was bought, and that will tell us something definite," Mr. Turner said, making a note. "And now, Dr. Cathcart, about these experiments of yours—" Ernest raised his eyebrows and drew in his lips. "Mr. Franklin was mentioning them to me just now. I understand they had to do with poisons and antidotes to poisons—is that correct?"

"In a certain way, yes."

"And Mr. Nelson took some interest in them?"

"At one time he did."

"Not of late?"

"No."

"But at one time his interest was pretty keen?"

"At one time, yes."

"Now, Dr. Cathcart, you'll see what I'm driving at. Do you think it possible that Mr. Nelson ever made any experiments on his own account?"

"No, I don't suppose it for one moment. He had no scientific knowledge of chemicals whatever. He understood

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nothing at all about them. It wasn't *that* side of . . . of what I was doing that interested him."

"Could you tell us what his interest was, Ernest?" John suggested.

"Oh, I don't know," Ernest answered curtly. "Not the details . . . just the thing as a whole—that it should be a success. A *financial* success."

"But, Dr. Cathcart," the inspector went on smoothly, "just consider this point. Did Mr. Nelson possibly take more interest than you imagined? You say he sometimes ordered chemicals for you. Do you think he may have sometimes got them on his own account and made experiments with them?"

"No, I don't. I couldn't imagine anything of the sort. What you suggest is impossible. For one thing Mr. Nelson had definitely lost all belief in the results of my researches."

"You're thinking of the way he talked at lunch to-day," John said, "but all that was nonsense. You can't judge by that."

Ernest made no remark.

"You think he could not for instance have got hold of some mistaken idea about antidotes?" Mr. Turner persisted, "some formula of yours perhaps that he thought he understood——"

"All that you suggest is absolutely impossible. Mr. Nelson could not have read or understood any formula of mine."

"But we're suggesting that he may have thought he could," John pleaded. "It does seem to me just possible."

"I can only repeat what I have said," Ernest replied. "Surely you can understand that, John? You know my

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researches were not concerned with the direct action of poisons. They were directed to quite a different end."

"Could you just indicate their direction to Mr. Turner?"

"I was trying to find," Ernest began wearily, "a solution for impregnating a certain material to be used for masks in war; a solution which would make it absolutely impervious to poison-gas. Mr. Nelson had been badly gassed at one time and was interested in my experiments up to a point. But he had completely lost faith in them. Completely."

There was a moment's silence. "It would of course be a great relief if we could find there had been any such mistake as I have suggested." Mr. Turner said thoughtfully.

"It would make a difference?" Ernest asked.

"It would make a very great difference to the feelings of his friends, of course. And then——" he stopped, and added a moment later, "then there's the impression it would make on other people."

"What people? I never heard that Mr. Nelson had any near relatives."

"No sir; but a case like this, you see, when it gets about is bound to make a stir. Mr. Nelson was well-known as an artist; his sudden death will come as a shock to the public."

"The public!" Ernest said, wincing.

"Why, of course, sir. And then the circumstances, the manner of it."

"Of his suicide, you mean?"

"Well, that he should commit suicide at all, in the first place; and then that he should do it in this way."

"You think it so very extraordinary?"

"I do, sir; and I can't construct it in my own mind at

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all, can't seem to see how it would have happened," the inspector said.

"But you know none of the circumstances. Suppose he found himself in a position . . . suppose he had done something, something disgraceful and felt that he might be publicly exposed . . . or that he must explain . . . confess the truth . . ."

"Then why come to the studio at all at that time?"

"People do act in extraordinary ways sometimes if they are in extraordinary circumstances."

The inspector was silent for a moment, his eyes on the floor, deep in speculation.

"In that case," he said at last, "he must have carried the means on him; and it wasn't this little bottle. Let me think," and there was another pause.

"He might——" Ernest began.

"Yes, sir?"

"He might have carried a capsule in his pocket; he might have prepared it himself from that bottle."

"Could he have done that, sir?"

"It's quite an easy thing to do."

"Yes, that's possible. Quite possible. Now I wonder when this was purchased? The paper is so clean, it hardly looks as though it had been a day in his pocket."

"You think it may have been got this morning, in fact?" John asked.

"If it had been," the inspector said slowly, as if reckoning back over times and events, "it was bought before ten o'clock. You say he brought the coat with him when he came first, and he left it in the studio where it was found at three o'clock, and removed. Now Mr. Nelson never went

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back to the studio, did he, between the time he left it for lunch and the time he returned for tea ? ”

“ No,” John said decidedly.

“ You are mistaken, John,” Ernest said ; “ he did.”

“ When ? ” John asked, and Mr. Turner seized his notebook.

“ Just before I left. He and I walked together to the side door ; you saw us, John, didn’t you ? ”

“ I saw you walk round the corner of the house. I couldn’t see any further.”

“ Tell us exactly what happened, sir,” said the inspector.

“ I passed him, you know, on my way out, and as I passed he joined me and I asked him what he meant to do in the afternoon. I couldn’t believe he really meant . . . Well, I thought he was joking when he said he would be painting. You know the mood he was in. He didn’t answer me, but said he was just going to get something from his coat in the studio, and walked round with me to the side door. I began to speak again and he muttered something . . . I can’t remember his words, something about ‘ everything being all up now,’ or ‘ everything would have to come out now ’ . . . just the way he had talked at lunch. I took it to be nonsense.”

“ But did he go into the house ? ”

“ For a minute or two, yes. Then he came out again and I went off.”

“ Dr. Cathcart, be very careful here. You say a minute or two ; how long was it actually before he came out ? ”

“ I *couldn’t* say for a certainty. John, you saw me go away, didn’t you ? How long did it seem to you that we were talking ? ”

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"Not more than three minutes . . . perhaps four," John said, trying hard to remember. "But Mrs. Smith was in here; she would have heard; she never misses a sound."

"Then we'll refer the fact to her," Mr. Turner said. "Now, Dr. Cathcart, had he anything in his hand when he came out?"

"I think not. I feel sure he hadn't."

"Not a pipe or anything?"

"His pipe was in his mouth all the time; it had gone out. I noticed that."

"I, too," John put in.

"Then I understand he walked back to the garden, and you left by the gate in the wall. Is that all you can tell us, Dr. Cathcart?"

"Absolutely all."

"Now, Mr. Franklin, when he came round the corner of the house again did you notice whether he was carrying anything?"

"I don't think so. I think his hands were in his pockets. But of course——"

"What is it, sir?"

John hesitated. "It isn't likely there was any connection, but I told you of a small parcel he handed to Muriel a few minutes after he came back."

"What's that? What are you talking of? Why do you bring in Muriel's name?" Ernest interrupted sharply.

"Because Harold did hand her a little parcel of some sort before he went off," John said. "I had told Mr. Turner about that before."

"It's quite irrelevant! It can have nothing to do with all this," Ernest said loudly and decidedly.

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"Excuse me, Dr. Cathcart, no one can say at this stage what is relevant and what isn't," the Inspector remarked quietly. "Mr. Franklin's in the right to have mentioned it."

"I can find out from Muriel to-morrow; she'll tell me exactly what it was," John said.

"You see, sir," Mr. Turner went on to Ernest, who still glowered, "as I was saying before, it's what other people will think that I'm considering. Everything will be sifted, everyone questioned——"

"Everyone questioned!" Ernest echoed.

"But of course, sir; everyone who was in the room at the time, or who knew anything at all bearing on the circumstances. Miss Muriel and the other young lady——"

"We needn't surely consider *her*," Ernest said contemptuously.

"You're wrong again, Dr. Cathcart. She has to be considered, and seriously considered. She is the very one that may make all the stir. If it's true that she's a cinema star and at all well-known . . . Why, you can see for yourself, sir . . . that the papers will be out for all the details they can get."

Ernest stared at him. "I see," he said at last in a different tone.

"And it may be even worse than that," the inspector added.

"I don't know how," John said; "this publicity and raking into one's private affairs! What can be worse?"

"Mr. Franklin, I beg you won't take things at this stage too seriously. I'm just turning over possibilities in my mind. I've often told you I'm no good at theories; I just want to

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have every single fact gathered together, and then they'll perhaps sort themselves for me."

"But you said 'even worse'!"

"I was considering the newspapers and what people of that sort might think. If we have got all the facts we can be ready for any contingency. But if not—if there's anything we have missed——"

"Turner, this isn't like you!" John said. "What are you driving at? Tell us plainly."

"Well, sir, that little parcel, for instance, that Mr. Nelson handed to Miss Muriel—that must be explained. She must be able to prove exactly what its contents were; prove what she did with them . . . all her actions——"

"Of course she can do that!" John said. "Why, you sound as though she might be suspected of having supplied the poison. . .!"

"And she might be," the inspector said quite calmly and decisively. Both the others started at his words. "You see what I mean," he went on before either could get out a word. "You're full of indignation at the very mention of such a thing—and quite right, too. But it's facts we want if we're to answer effectually and on the spot,—and it's facts we've got to have. If they're not at your fingers' ends at the right moment then your chance of establishing the truth may be gone for ever. That's how false impressions get about and get believed. No, Dr. Cathcart, you must hear me out. I stated a mere possibility, but I repeat it because there is just a mere possibility that either of the two young ladies might be suspected. It's admitted that there was a quarrel, that there was jealousy, that there had been talk of poisons earlier in the day. . . .

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These are facts and they've got to be met with facts. Because if they are *not*, they are quite enough to cause ugly speculation, if not actual suspicion."

"If I thought anyone would dare to utter a suspicion of Muriel," Ernest exclaimed, springing up from his seat, "I'd go straight out now and give myself up to the nearest policeman and say I had done the whole thing."

"I'm quite sure you would, Dr. Cathcart," Mr. Turner agreed in a dry detached tone. "And, if you'll excuse my saying so, there would be your greatest mistake of all. To try to shield someone who has never been attacked is just a means of drawing attention, not to yourself, but to that very person. On what charge now would you ask a policeman to arrest you?"

"That I'd supplied the poison—filled the capsule—*changed* a capsule if you like— Anything!" Ernest stammered.

"Yes, sir, but you'd have to be more definite than that. If you had done it, why should he have possessed this bottle of prussic-acid at all?"

"I may have filled the thing at any time. Or he may have been carrying a capsule about him for days."

"He may; but I've said I think this bottle has only been in his pocket some hours. Also I believe it was opened in the studio to-day. Now if that was so it seems to me that Mr. Nelson opened it when he ran back to 'fetch something from his coat,' as he said. He may have prepared the capsule then and slipped it into his waistcoat-pocket. He may have had it there . . . in case . . . Well, if things were as you suggest, if he was in any sort of fear that something he had done and was ashamed of would be exposed . . . he might have had this by him as a last resort. It's possible,

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all that's possible. Yes, it seems to me a likely solution on the whole. But it has one drawback, Dr. Cathcart," the Inspector paused and threw a side glance at the other; "it cuts *you* out altogether! For as I understand you can have had nothing at all to do with it. You were the one person who never entered the studio to-day until you were called there by Mrs. Smith and found the poor gentleman dead."

"You seem very well informed about my movements," Ernest said haughtily.

"Yes, sir, that's my job."

Ernest was silent, but his face was so contemptuous that John said quickly: "You see the Inspector's point, Ernest. We've got to have our facts clear and in order, and leave nothing to chance. Otherwise . . . Well, I can see that there is just a possibility that suspicion might be created; though please God things will never come to that. But you do see what we mean, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't know what anything means at the moment!" Ernest cried distractedly. "I want to go away and think it all over."

"You're in the right, Dr. Cathcart!" the Inspector said with finality and getting up from his chair. "Talk is of no use at all just now. It leads nowhere, and only makes confusion. You go straight home, sir, and if I want you later in the evening I'll ring you up. Your house is on the 'phone, of course?"

"Not my house—I've given that up; but my laboratory round the corner is, and I shall be there."

"Not working, Ernest?" John pleaded.

"No, not necessarily; but I shall be quieter there than anywhere else, and I'll come round at once if you want me."

“ And you, Mr. Franklin,” the inspector went on ; “ go upstairs to your sitting-room and don’t come down unless I fetch you. I must see the coroner at once and notify the facts in the right quarters. I want to get the body removed to a mortuary before your servants come home ; that seems to me the first thing to do ; and it means that I shall be bringing other people back with me, so if you have a spare latchkey I shall be glad to have it. I shall probably be to and fro a good many times.”

John found and gave him Mrs. Smith’s key.

“ Then I must go round to Mr. Nelson’s rooms and interview the people who look after the place. After that there are these chemists to be seen, and the solicitors, and Mr. Nelson’s bankers . . . Let me see ; this is Tuesday . . . I don’t know that to-morrow will be possible, but I’ll try to get the inquest arranged for Thursday. There’s sure to be an adjournment of perhaps a week, and in that week we must get everything straightened out. Now about to-morrow. All this will keep me busy in the morning and most of the afternoon. And you, Mr. Franklin, must go over and see Miss Muriel, and if possible, get those facts we spoke of. Then we shall know a little better how we stand. Shall we meet here to-morrow at half-past four ? Dr. Cathcart . . . ? ”

“ Yes, I’ll be here.”

“ And while you’re away, Mr. Franklin, will you give orders that no one whatever is to be admitted to the house ? The servants are to understand that on no plea whatsoever is anyone to come inside the doors. Can you trust them to be firm ? ”

“ I think so.”

“ Does that apply to me too ? ” Ernest enquired. “ If

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I happened to turn up five minutes before John's return to-morrow am I not to be admitted?" he spoke in irony, but Mr. Turner answered quite tranquilly. "I'd rather you waited, if you please, sir."

"Oh—of course, if you wish it."

"And, Dr. Cathcart, I'll send you the formal notice of the inquest, or see that it's sent. You know of course that as the first medical man to see the body your evidence will be important. You'll know exactly what to say. There's no doubt as to the cause of death."

"None whatever; it was prussic-acid, and being prussic-acid was instantaneous."

"It'll be just the question between suicide or misadventure. As for the rest our aim is to make the business as short as possible. Later on——"

"Later on?"

"Well, we'll take one thing at a time," the Inspector said, checking himself.

"John, can't I do anything for you?" Ernest enquired, turning to him; "let me bring you round something to make you sleep."

"No, old fellow, thank you. I shall be better without it."

"I hate to think of your being here alone. Won't you let me come round and keep you company?"

"I believe it would be better not. We should only get talking of all this and working up our nerves about it."

"I swear I won't mention the subject."

"No, but I shall! I wouldn't trust myself for half-an-hour. And if we didn't talk we should each know what the other was thinking about. Come to-morrow, when I shall have news of Muriel to give you. And Mr. Turner will be in

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and out during the evening. I suppose you wouldn't care to have a bed made ready for you, would you, Turner ? "

" I don't think there'll be much chance of bed for me to-night ! " Mr. Turner replied.

" I had better go, then," Ernest said. " Good-night, Mr. Turner. Good-night, John."

He turned sharply out of the room and would have shut the door behind him but John as quickly followed and went across the hall with him.

" You won't let me thank you, of course ! " he said ; " so how am I to let you know how grateful I am for all you have done for us ? "

" I've done nothing," Ernest said. " You've chosen to get an outsider, and if the whole country is ringing with our names in the next few days—you know who to thank for it," and with this he was out of the house.

" You see how it is, Turner," John said as he joined the Inspector again ; " the poor fellow takes offence, and then there's nothing to be done with him. But you'll find he can be different altogether when you know him better."

" That's all right, Mr. Franklin," the Inspector said cheerfully. " I'm not troubling about Dr. Cathcart. I know his kind ; I often meet it. Barristers don't like it, because it's most difficult to deal with in the witness-box. Always on the defensive and ready to see more behind one's words than one knows oneself. But I don't doubt he can be a good friend and I daresay he'll be a good help, too, to us in the long run. It was something quite different that I was wondering about just then. But we won't talk now. I want these addresses and 'phone numbers, please, and I want them at once. Then I must get to work."

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John took the telephone-book and directory and read out and verified names, addresses and numbers, all of which Mr. Turner entered carefully and then carefully checked in his pocket-book. The last of them was copied from the envelope which Miss Brown had thrown on the table before her hasty flight.

“ Was this what you were wondering about ? ” John asked.

“ Well,” Mr. Turner admitted, “ I was just wishing I knew what the contents of this might have been——”

CHAPTER V

NEXT DAY

JOHN was in the little den next day quite an hour before the time fixed, and was looking forward to the meeting with a somewhat troubled mind. For one thing, although he was alone at the moment, he would not be so when Ernest and Mr. Turner joined them, and he was not at all sure how they would welcome the additional member at the conference.

Early in the day he had gone to his sister's house, had spent the forenoon there and had talked both with Muriel and with Mrs. Smith. But on the subject of these talks, the subject about which his sister and all her household longed to question him, he gave no information whatever ; and this with a manner so determined, and so unlike his usual frankness, that he managed to enforce silence on them.

Arthur, however, refused to be classed with the others, insisting that he must be an exception, that he knew too much already for there to be any need of secrecy ; and when they were alone together he pressed so many hints and considerations on his uncle that at last for the sake of peace John compromised with him. On condition that Arthur spoke no more for the moment on the forbidden subject, he agreed to be motored back to town by him, and to allow him to be present when he met the others. His nephew could then hear all there was to be told.

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This concession now troubled him ; but more still was he troubled at the thought of having to repeat to the others the story of poor Muriel's share in the tragedy, as told by herself to her father. Ernest with his morbid hatred of publicity would writhe at its recital ; John could already see in imagination the amazed, indignant stare which would be turned on himself. Well ! better that, he thought, than this readiness of Arthur's to discuss everything and everyone as though there were no such thing as personal privacy in the world.

The opening of the front-door roused him, and he looked up expecting to see his nephew who had strolled into the garden ; but it was his friend the Inspector. John was glad of this, glad to explain the extra guest before he made his appearance, and relieved by the quiet smile with which the Inspector heard him.

" And as we are alone for a minute, Turner," John went on hurriedly " there's just one thing I'd like to tell you. You remember I was to ask Mrs. Smith if she could corroborate what Dr. Cathcart told us of what passed between him and Mr. Nelson as they parted outside the window here yesterday ? "

" I remember well. It's an important point, and I hoped you would bring me word about it."

" Yes, and I wanted to get over the telling of it before Ernest comes, lest he should think we mistrusted him. Though as a matter of fact her account agrees with his entirely. I didn't cross-question her or show that I thought it important, you know ; I leave all that to you. I just asked her what she remembered and I scribbled down what she said. She was sitting near the window here, in case I should call her when Dr. Cathcart and Mr. Nelson came round the corner of

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the house. She heard Mr. Nelson say something was in the pocket of his great-coat and they stood for a moment by the side-door. She says: 'Mr. Harold was speaking to Mr. Ernest, and then I heard him run into the house and into the studio; and *after three or four minutes* (she's certain it wasn't more) he came out.' Then the two parted; Ernest went out at the gate in the wall, and Harold walked back to the garden."

The inspector took down the words carefully. "There can be no doubt he went into the studio?"

"None at all."

"Then we have those facts all clear and well-attested," he said, and walked to the place where Mrs. Smith must have sat. At the same moment Arthur Bertram sauntered round the little path and catching sight of the others hurried to the side-door.

"You see exactly how it would be," John said. "We lose sight of him for a moment while he's actually at the entrance, as it's flush with this window; but you can hear his steps in the hall, and you couldn't fail to know for a certainty if he went to the studio."

Arthur was in the little den and quick to begin questioning the inspector, for he had much to learn from him on technical points. John pretended to look over the day's paper, but listened the while, amazed at the pertinacity of the questioner, and amused at the good-natured non-committal answers he extracted. This verbal duel was still going on when the front-door bell rang and John hurried to meet Ernest and warn him of his nephew's presence.

Ernest, who was panting and breathless from running, exclaimed at sight of him. "John! I came early——"

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"We all did, old fellow," John said quickly by way of preparation.

"All?" he stopped short.

"The Inspector and my nephew are here."

Ernest walked into the room and threw a look at the others, then turned again to John, saying in a voice like a challenge: "You have been to Beckenham and seen Mrs. Smith and Muriel.—Well?"

"Yes, I've seen them both, and poor Muriel is perhaps calmer than I feared she would be. I'll tell you all about her in a minute or two. But Inspector Turner has been here half an hour and I think he ought to speak first. Sit down, Ernest. Now, Turner!"

Mr. Turner took out his pocket-book and, having found the place, began to read, checking the various items as he did so.

"Well, first let me run through the business part of what I've been able to do since last evening. I have seen the people at Mr. Nelson's rooms; the landlord as well as his batman who looked after him and who lived on the premises. I have locked up the sitting-rooms, Mr. Nelson's bedroom and the studio, leaving this man Williams just his own little kitchen-suite and bedroom. I may tell you that the poor man was literally overwhelmed with the news about his master. Couldn't believe it; *won't* believe that it was suicide. Declares that there wasn't a sign about Mr. Nelson's manner which gave any indication of such an intention. Unless"—here he stopped a moment—"unless, possibly, it might be some worry about *money*. I had no time to ask questions then. You and I, Mr. Franklin, must go quickly through Mr. Nelson's papers before the inquest. I'm bound

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to say that by the hurried glance I threw at the rooms before I locked them up I could see no sign of preparation or anything of the sort. But we shall have to look closer into that, too. Here are the keys of the flat, and here are Mr. Nelson's private keys and the pocket-book found on him. At half-past nine to-morrow, Mr. Franklin, I'll ask you as Mr. Nelson's executor to meet me at his place. Will you make a note of that, sir, please, and be on time?"

There was a businesslike authority and despatch about Mr. Turner when he was formally at work which enforced attention and was in marked contrast to his ordinary modest and rather retiring manner. John nodded and obeyed him. "Then I have seen Mr. Nelson's Solicitors and yours, Mr. Franklin, and also Mr. Nelson's Bankers, and I have made some temporary arrangements with them which I'll tell you in detail to-morrow morning." He looked through this information as if to be sure he had left out nothing; then went on: "I have got the inquest settled for to-morrow afternoon at three o'clock. You, Mr. Franklin, will be there, and you, of course, Dr. Cathcart. You will receive the formal notices this afternoon if you have not had them already, and you will find all the information in them. I have caused one to be delivered personally to Miss Phyllis Brown who was in the room at the time of death. Now, sir, what about Miss Franklin? Will she be well enough to attend?"

"Not a chance of it, inspector. My sister's doctor saw her this morning and I ventured to ask him the question, as I knew you wanted to get things fixed for to-morrow; but he says she could not possibly stand such an ordeal so soon after the shock she has had."

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"Then perhaps Mr. Bertram will be good enough to get him to make out a certificate to that effect, and bring it to the court to-morrow, before three o'clock. You are not formally called as a witness to-morrow, Mr. Bertram, and neither is Mrs. Smith, but I think Mrs. Smith should be here at the house if need should arise. You, sir, would probably be present in any case?"

"I certainly shall," Arthur said.

"Now before we go to other matters," the inspector went on, "is there anything about the mere business arrangements that anyone would like to question me? This won't be the final inquest, as I've told you; there'll be an adjournment; and I hope to get through to-morrow's proceedings as quickly as possible. The less said on these occasions the better."

Arthur seemed to be searching his brain for some apt criticism, though unable to find one in time, and Ernest was silent; but John could not restrain himself from saying, "Turner, you must have worked all night and all morning to accomplish so much!"

"Yes, Mr. Turner, that's true," Arthur said generously; and the rather formal atmosphere which had fallen on the party lightened. But when the inspector spoke again it was quite as gravely as before.

"There is something more to tell you," he said. "I have interviewed Messrs. Clark and Juxon, the chemists who supplied the little bottle of prussic-acid——" The other three turned sharply round; "there is no doubt whatever on the subject. Mr. Nelson bought it there yesterday, Tuesday morning, at about a quarter to ten on his way here. I saw his signature in the book. The man who served him knew

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him quite well, and had often served him before. He, of course, will be at the inquest to-morrow and will swear to the facts."

"Then that settles it," Arthur said. "As I thought—suicide. No mystery at all."

"But, Arthur, the bottle was here in Harold's coat where he could not get at it——" John said.

Arthur looked contemptuous. "But it had been opened; some of it had been taken." He turned to Ernest. "Could Harold have prepared a capsule for himself? Did he know enough?"

"It's possible. Oh yes, I should say he did."

"I suppose he got nothing at all from the chemists besides the poison?"

"Nothing at all," said the Inspector.

"And there was no question asked?"

"No; the man said Mr. Nelson once told him he was interested in chemical experiments, and he had served him with poisons before."

"It's rather queer," Arthur said after a moment's silence, during which his thoughts seemed to veer round; "if he only bought the poison at that hour when did he fill the capsule? He could hardly have done it in the street! Now, was there time in those three or four minutes when he went back to the studio after lunch? What do you think, Dr. Cathcart?"

"That must have been the time, I imagine."

"But why should he do it just then? He expected then to be alone all afternoon, painting, didn't he? Expected the coat would be lying near him all the time. Didn't expect Uncle John or Muriel to come in at all. It was

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after that that you changed the plans, wasn't it, Uncle John ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Then I call it a decidedly queer business,” Arthur said. “ And there's that little parcel he gave Muriel. Did you learn anything about that to-day ? It seems to me rather an important point.”

“ Yes,” John said, his heart failing now at the task of relating poor Muriel's confession. Still, it must be done.

“ Well, it was all much as one would expect,” he began, and sighed. “ It seems that she and Harold had a quarrel on Monday evening. He dined here, and afterwards when they were alone and talking, he suddenly and quite unexpectedly suggested that they should put off the date of their marriage.”

“ Giving what reason ? ” Arthur asked.

“ That is just the point. He wouldn't give any real reason ; would only make a joke of it and say things were so delightful as they were at present that it would be a pity to make any change. . . . You know how he used to tease her ! Well,” he hesitated, finding the task harder and harder, “ Muriel lost her temper and accused him of being in love with this girl Miss Brown, and of playing a double part ”—he was conscious here of Ernest's dark eyes fixed intently upon him—“ and Harold would only laugh and say of course it was that, and that it was a beautiful reason too,—making a burlesque of it all, always insisting, however, that the date of the marriage should be put off—till she sprang up and told him he could go, that she had done with him and would not marry him at all. And with that she walked out of the room and very soon afterwards she heard him leave the house.

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I remember that he did go early without saying good night me." The three men heard him in silence.

"After he had gone she took off her engagement ring, put it in a tiny jeweller's box, then enclosed it in an envelope and addressed it to Harold. Then she walked round to his flat and dropped the envelope in at his letter-box."

"And then?" Arthur asked.

"Naturally she never expected he would turn up to lunch next day, even though it had been arranged that he should. But he did come, and he carried on in the same mad fashion; with Miss Brown looking on in that odd silent way of hers. It's hardly to be wondered that Muriel was angry," he sighed again. "But of course I knew nothing; only thought she was showing temper and making herself ridiculous. But that time when she left me in the garden and rushed to the house, Harold stepped forward and handed her the little parcel—her own—the engagement ring, just as she had sent it to him. When she saw what it was she rushed straight down to the Embankment and hurled the thing into the river."

"It was Harold's fault for playing the fool like that," Arthur said.

"This is important, sir," Mr. Turner commented; "particularly these two points. Did she examine the parcel? Is she absolutely certain it was the ring?"

"She is absolutely certain, but she judged only from the box; she didn't open it."

"I wonder if anyone saw her throw it?" the inspector said thoughtfully.

"I wish we knew without a doubt it really was the ring," Arthur added.

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"What else could it possibly have been?" demanded Ernest.

"I don't know; it's all so odd. The more we find out, the queerer the whole thing becomes. I don't like it. I don't like it at all." This from Arthur.

"But, Arthur, why? I thought this would explain the incident quite satisfactorily," John protested.

"Yes, if Muriel's account is believed."

"Why should anyone doubt it?"

"Well, suppose there was a suggestion that it wasn't suicide . . . wasn't even an accident—" Arthur said.

"There was the purchase of poison by Mr. Nelson on the very day, you remember, sir," put in the inspector quietly.

"Yes, I know. That ought to be enough to convince any court. But I'm thinking of what Harold's friends may say, and the gutter-press if they get an inkling of all this. It's not as though he were unknown. An artist of his reputation drops down dead at his easel in the presence of two young girls, one of whom is engaged to him, and the other a cinema actress with looks that are enough of themselves to start a sensation. Have you thought what it'll be like, Uncle John? The house, the servants, the very tradesmen,—they'll all be besieged for information. We shan't be able to move for the cameras that will be turned on us all."

John glanced at the other two. Ernest's face was set and hard in the effort to hide his feeling; Mr. Turner was listening thoughtfully.

"It'll be damnable," Arthur went on; "and just think of poor Muriel's position. All this story having to come out—a quarrel and then suicide. . . . And the last thing he tasted was a cup of tea passed to him by these two girls! Why, it'll

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raise a perfect storm! *One* of the two will be suspected, as sure as fate."

"The whole contents of the tea-tray will be analysed before the real inquest, Mr. Bertram," Mr. Turner said.

"But his tea-cup was smashed to pieces and the tea spilt all over the floor. I saw it."

"I think we have saved enough for a test. And there will probably be a post-mortem which will settle the question."

"Long before those analysts have settled any question the rest of the country will do it for them. Now suppose this Miss Brown should be suspected? What's her answer? If she's questioned she says she was here on Tuesday and heard quarrelling at lunch, and afterwards saw Mr. Nelson give Miss Franklin a little parcel. Mr. Nelson, remember, who had bought poison that very morning! And an hour or two later Miss Franklin gets her to pass a cup of tea to Harold, after drinking which he falls down dead. And what's more," he added, his voice changing, "she hears Muriel cry out at once that it is all *her* fault—all Muriel's fault! What did she mean by that? What on earth did she mean? Did you ask her?"

"Why, the poor child's heart-broken about it, and blames herself, of course," John said, his own voice faltering now. "She thinks Harold may have been somewhere near; he went out soon after she did—and seen her throw the ring. . . . And when he came back to the studio and saw for a fact that she was not wearing it . . . that he . . . that he realised everything was over. . . ."

"It wouldn't be a bit like Harold," Arthur declared; "and who can prove that it was the ring at all? Or that she really did throw it? Who will believe her?"

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"Mrs. Smith noticed at lunch yesterday that Muriel was not wearing her ring. She told me so at once."

"Well, that's something," Arthur said; "but I call the whole thing a devil of a mess and I'm sure I don't know what the court will make of it. I never came across a worse tangle in my life. You people don't seem to realise——"

"Yes, Arthur, Mr. Turner has already touched on all this," John said with restraint.

"But this other girl, Miss Brown. Who is she? Have you made any enquiries about her since yesterday? Where is she now? Where does she live?"

Mr. Turner took up his pocket-book again. "This is the address she gave," he said, taking out a much-studied envelope.

"That's Harold's handwriting!" Arthur said instantly. "Do you know anything of the place?"

"Yes and no," the Inspector answered. "It was this way. I sent one of our men round there last evening and he saw Mrs. Paxton who lives there. He described her as a very nice woman and the house quite of a superior sort, though it's just one of a row of houses in a small street. It seems that Miss Brown has had a couple of rooms there for the last three months and has been living very quietly without any cinema work. Mrs. Paxton's own daughter is a film actress, and she and Miss Brown were friends."

"H'm," Arthur said. "A small street in Battersea and a quiet retired life don't accord with my impressions of the young lady. Did your man see Miss Brown herself last night?"

"No; she did not go back there last night."

"I thought not! She's given us the slip. Just what I expected!"

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"Excuse me, Mr. Bertram, that is not so. She had not intended to come back. She had given Mrs. Paxton notice and left her, for good and all, yesterday morning. That had been arranged more than a week ago."

"What was the meaning of that? Did your man find out where she had gone?"

"Mrs. Paxton declared she did not know; that Miss Brown had made a great secret of it."

"Did he see the daughter? This friend you spoke of?"

"She was out. Mrs. Paxton said she had actually gone out to meet Miss Brown and had not come back. That was all she would tell him. She may, of course, have known more, but she was most unwilling to talk."

"But what has become of the girl? Where is she?"

"My man pressed Mrs. Paxton to give him any possible address where he might find her, but she persisted that she could not do so."

"And was that all? He let things go at that!" Arthur cried out indignantly.

John felt his heart beating faster. Only Ernest looked unsurprised.

"No," the Inspector answered. "I told you the notice of the inquest was given into Miss Brown's own hands this morning. It happened in this way. Mrs. Paxton told my man that if the matter was really urgent he had better be hanging about this morning when the postman came, because Miss Brown had said she would call round early to see if there were any letters for her and he would see her then, if she actually came. With that she shut the door on him."

"And your man saw Miss Brown and spoke to her?"

"He waited from seven o'clock till nearly nine and then he

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saw someone who answered to her description come walking down the street and go straight to No. 14."

"There was no mistake? It *was* she?"

"No mistake. He went up to her and asked her if she was Miss Phyllis Brown and gave her the notice to attend the inquest to-morrow."

"Well, how did she take it? What did she say?"

"He tells me she looked half-dead herself. He thought she would faint straight off then and there. He was horrified at her looks."

"Ah!" murmured Arthur.

"He asked her for her address, but she would not give it. Then he tried to get it out of her by offering to call and take her to the Court to-morrow or do anything to help her. But she only said, No; no, she wanted nothing; that she would be at the Court, that she quite understood, and so on; and that letters for her could be sent to Mrs. Paxton's house if necessary. And with that she knocked at the door and Mrs. Paxton let her in. That was the end. The man had no instructions further than to deliver the notice and come back to me."

"He should have waited to see her come out, and followed her," Arthur said. "Well, this is a peculiar situation! Of course," after a moment's silence and with a glance at Ernest; "of course there's one rather obvious inference that might be drawn."

"Very obvious indeed," Ernest said and looked at John.

"And it has this merit, anyway, that it is something definite and something that can be proved or disproved without question."

"Yes, sir," the Inspector said non-committally.

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"Then shouldn't that be the first thing to do now? And before to-morrow, before the inquest?"

"I think it will be better to keep to the original plan, sir, and that Mr. Franklin and I should go through Mr. Nelson's papers first. You see, we may come across something that would disclose what you are hinting at . . . some clue as to his . . . intentions." John winced at the word, as he had winced at Ernest's look.

"Yes, that's true," Arthur said, and seemed to be thinking deeply, muttering half to himself, "If that were so . . . if Harold had been fool enough to let himself be led on by a girl of that sort . . . and things had gone so far that he couldn't draw back . . . and then when he was brought face to face with both girls and knew he had to confess the whole story to Muriel. . . . Why, it isn't so much to be wondered at. . . . Yes; it must have been suicide. . . . That was my first impression, and I stick to it. Still, there are people who might form a different one, and for Muriel's sake we ought . . ."

During this soliloquy Mr. Turner had taken out his pen, and having secured a sheet of paper, was unobtrusively writing a note, all the time seeming attentive to Arthur's words. When he paused Mr. Turner looked up. "Excuse me a moment, Mr. Bertram, I want to ask Dr. Cathcart if he will do something for me."

"Something? Anything! Only tell me how I can help," Ernest exclaimed, springing to his feet.

John, who was conscious of the turmoil that was seething in Ernest, and expected an outburst every moment, could have embraced the inspector in his gratitude. Ernest's face was now eager and ready as a child's.

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"Then, sir," Mr. Turner went on, finishing his note and picking up an envelope, "will you take this to the address I've written here, and go down to the Embankment and make what enquiries you can about that little parcel and the ring?"

"But you never expect to find it, do you?" Arthur cried; "it'll be at the bottom of the river by this time! No dredge will ever get it up."

"Let me go . . . at once! Let me see if I can do anything," Ernest insisted.

"You'll find the police will give you all the assistance they can," Mr. Turner added. "Use any means you like on your own account. Advertise. Question any of those loungers that are always hanging about there: the hawkers, flower-sellers, people of that sort. One can never tell; there's always the millionth chance. It'll be something if we can only find someone who saw the thing thrown. Mr. Franklin, can you tell me anything like the spot where Miss Muriel would have been standing?"

"I can tell you almost exactly," John said. "It lies in a direct line from this house. You know that little sketch I have in the studio, Turner? The view from my room upstairs across the river? She ran straight there. Would you like to look at the picture?"

"No need, sir. I remember it well," the Inspector said, smiling, for he had often stood before it and declared it to be the best of all John's works. "And if there's nothing more you have to tell me, sir, and if Mr. Bertram has nothing more, I think I'll set out now with Dr. Cathcart and explain to him how to get to work." Ernest had already seized his hat and was trembling with eagerness to be off, hurrying out

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of the room without waiting for an answer from the other two.

"I'll ring you up later this evening, Mr. Franklin, if there's any occasion. If not, I'll be waiting for you at Mr. Nelson's rooms to-morrow morning at half-past nine," the Inspector said, nodding a farewell; and in a moment more he and Dr. Cathcart had gone.

Arthur Bertram, who looked annoyed and astounded at this prompt action, turned to his uncle at once. "Uncle John, have you let that man lock up the studio and keep the key?"

"Yes," John admitted, wishing his third companion would follow the other two.

"Why should it be locked up? Why can't I go in and have a look round?"

"It was Mr. Turner's wish."

"Mr. Turner's quite a good man, I daresay——" Arthur began.

"He is. I have every confidence in him."

"Yes, I know that, and I'm not disputing the fact. But all the same this talk of his about facts, facts, facts . . . It's all hopelessly old-fashioned, you know—absolutely out-of-date. He's been at Scotland Yard too long, and is out of touch with the way things should be handled nowadays. Of course the facts are important; but he simply ignores the psychological aspect of them. Even our Judges are beginning to see that that's the vital issue. This man never touches on it . . . doesn't even approach the deductive or constructive view of the business."

"I told you he wasn't brilliant. But I like him and I trust him. I know he'll do anything he can for me."

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" Yes, but take this move of his about Dr. Cathcart. Why on earth should he send a man like that off on a wild goose chase which will only waste time and lead to nothing? Can't he *see* that Dr. Cathcart knows more of Harold's private life and character than any of us? Why doesn't he try to get his confidence, and learn what there is to learn? "

" Perhaps he may do that yet."

" Yes; but, Uncle John, there's no time to be lost. To-morrow we shall have this inquest, and after that there's no knowing what people may be saying. I can't understand what makes him so deliberate and round-about. Why, by this time——"

" After all, it is only twenty-four hours, Arthur," John said mildly.

" But with his opportunities," Arthur persisted, " he ought to have sifted all this question about Miss Brown and left no mystery whatever. It's that wretched girl that's going to cause all the bother—I can see that."

" Perhaps."

" Mr. Turner oughtn't to have left a ' perhaps.' He ought to know where the girl was yesterday afternoon between the time she left you and the time she came back. And where Harold was too, just then. Has it ever occurred to you that they might have slipped round to a registry office and got married? "

" When you spoke as you did just now the thought flashed through my mind, naturally. But I won't believe it of Harold. He really cared for Muriel, I'm sure he did."

" But Muriel suspected him."

" I don't believe that either. Not seriously; not with her real self."

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"But was Harold his real self just then? Wasn't he infatuated with this girl?"

"I *can't* believe it."

"No, Uncle John, that's just it. You can't believe evil of people and I never expect it of you. But this fellow Turner ought to be more awake to it. He just sits there and never makes a suggestion, or asks a question; just takes in a few miserable facts and never gives out anything. He's never discussed the girl at all, doesn't even know where she's to be found. Yet that girl could easily have queered the whole pitch for us. How do you know she didn't see the bottle of poison on the floor yesterday and nip it up when she ran out of the room with her clothes? She would have heard you carry the coat over here, earlier in the afternoon. What should prevent her slipping in and hiding it in Harold's pocket? No one would have seen her."

"Why should she do that?"

"Well, I can imagine reasons. But I'm not saying that she did or that she didn't; it's not my business to enquire into that, since Mr. Turner is in charge of the case. But I do think he ought to have shown more enterprise about her movements. Not have swerved off on this hunt after the ring. That could have waited."

John was silent, and Arthur, too, fell to musing.

"Well, if I can do nothing for you I'd better be off, perhaps," he said at length.

"I won't ask you to stay now," John said wearily. "I shall see you to-morrow afternoon at the Court. But, Arthur, not a word to Muriel as yet of what's been said to-day."

"Just as you wish, Uncle John. You think she shouldn't be warned?"

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"No, no. Not until it's absolutely necessary. Not until something has been actually proved."

"I'll say nothing. And you, uncle? You'll have a good night's rest, won't you? I daresay things won't be so bad, after all, you know."

But this reassurance came too late. He had already started in John's mind fears which could not be easily dismissed, and which made sleep for him that night impossible.

CHAPTER VI

AT HAROLD'S FLAT

It was with an aching head that John set out next morning, and with a heart that nearly failed him. But when he met the Inspector, cheerful and businesslike, waiting at the door of Harold Nelson's rooms, his spirits revived a little. "Do you think it'll be a very long job, Turner?" he asked after the first greetings, as they stood waiting for the bell to be answered.

"I couldn't give a guess, sir. I haven't examined anything carefully. I came round here on Tuesday evening and saw Mr. Nelson's man and told him what had happened; then I got him to give me the keys and locked up the rooms. I haven't been here since. He seems a decent sort, this Williams."

"Yes; he was Harold's batman in France. He'll be feeling all this terribly. I know he was devoted to Harold."

Next moment when the door was opened, and he was face to face with the man whom he knew well, John's heart was smitten with self-reproach. "Selfish brute that I am!" he thought. "Looking on all this as though it only concerned me and my own household. I might have come round and said a word of sympathy to this poor fellow," and he put out his hand and grasped that of the batman, who signed to them to come in. "This is a terrible blow for you, Williams."

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"You may say that, Mr. Franklin. I can't believe it. I *can't* believe he's dead."

"I know," John murmured; "it does seem unbelievable. I can't realise it either."

"But the manner of it, Mr. Franklin!" the man said, his face shaken with distress; "to think that he should come to his end in that way. . . ."

"You are as much astounded as I was," John said. "Come in, Williams, and tell me about him. I would have been round to see you before, but I haven't had time to get my thoughts together."

"Go in there, sir," said the Inspector quietly, opening a sitting-room door; then after throwing up the windows and giving a quick glance round, he slipped away, leaving the two alone.

"It's the manner of it that cuts me to the heart, Mr. Franklin," the poor fellow went on, obeying mechanically the gentle insistence of John's arm, and sitting in the chair pushed towards him. "After all we've been through together *out there*, facing death together day after day, and then that he should go and take his life and not a word, not a hint to me that anything was wrong——!" He could not go on.

"Williams, it can't seem a greater mystery to you than it does to me. I no more suspected him of having anything on his mind than you did. I thought he was perfectly happy. I haven't a guess at his reason. I can't help thinking it must have been a mistake . . . an accident."

"You think that's possible, sir?—in spite of what the Inspector says?"

"The other seems so *impossible*, so utterly impossible."

"If only that could be proved, sir—that it was an accident!"

"We've come round this morning hoping to find some evidence that will help us," John told him; "or that perhaps you could throw some light on it all."

"I've been thinking of nothing else ever since the Inspector called. But I can't get my mind to grasp it. I feel all done in, sir. I've nothing to say, nothing at all. I'm sure I don't know what they'll be expecting of me at this inquest this afternoon."

"It won't be much of a business, Williams, so Mr. Turner tells me. You'll probably only be asked to describe Mr. Nelson's movements on Tuesday and his manner lately, and that sort of thing."

"That's what I keep thinking of—his manner lately."

"Do tell me about him. Had he seemed depressed or worried?"

"Well, in a way he had, yes. I suppose you may say he had."

"He *had*? And for how long had you noticed it?"

"Only for the last couple of weeks. But it didn't seem serious, if you know what I mean. He seemed annoyed and worried; but not desperate, nothing like that."

"Annoyed and worried," John repeated. "Not desperate. And not excited? Not as though he were making up his mind to some—some decision or change?"

"Not excited at all, sir."

"Had he spoken of his marriage lately?" John asked, trying to make the words sound natural. He glanced away from Williams as he spoke, and his eye fell suddenly on the mantelpiece, where three unframed photographs of the kind

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described by photographers as "panel size" were conspicuously propped against the clock.

"Well, sir," the batman began, and stopped.

"Go on, Williams. Be quite open with me."

"He did speak lately as though it might not take place in July, after all."

"He said that?"

"I forget the exact words; but I took that to be his meaning, sir."

"Did he give you any reason?"

"No, sir."

"No reason at all?"

"None, sir."

"You must have been surprised at that, Williams?"

"I was very much surprised indeed, sir. He had been so impatient about it a month or two back."

John's heart swelled, and he could hardly ask the next question; he turned his eyes resolutely from the mantelpiece.

"But you must have made a guess. Knowing Mr. Nelson as you did, you must have had some idea as to what his reason was."

"No, sir," the man said resolutely. "I don't think I had."

"It will be a real kindness to me if you can give me a hint, Williams," John said.

"Mr. Franklin, I'd tell you if I knew. There was only one reason I could possibly think of."

"And what was——?"

"I thought he must be short of money."

"Short of money," John repeated, and fell into thought.

"But Mr. Nelson was doing well, had plenty of orders, hadn't he?"

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"He had, sir; more than he could execute, though he'd been working here quite late after he left your studio."

"And he was well paid," John mused; "how could he be short of money?" He spoke more to himself than to the other. "When he used to talk of his marriage a month or two back, Williams, and seemed so anxious for it, did he ever hint at any difficulty?"

"No, sir, I never heard him. But he was so careless about money he simply threw it away. If he wanted a thing he never stopped to think whether he could afford it; he'd sit down and write a cheque and there would be an end of it. And as for what he gave away to other people . . . why, he never knew the amount; that I'm sure of!" And the man's eyes filled with tears.

"And yet you think he had been worrying about his affairs lately?"

"Thinking it over, it seems that perhaps he was. There were one or two little things——"

"Yes?"

"Well, there was something in connection with a picture he painted of Lord Wessex—you remember his lordship, sir? A Jewish gentleman."

"I remember," John said, and smiled. Harold had introduced him to his lordship—a newly-made peer—and John had not hesitated afterwards to sell a quite small picture to him at quite a large price. Lord Wessex was a millionaire; the millions having been acquired, it was said, through the sweated labour of others; his peerage, on the other hand, through his large donations to charities. "What happened about the portrait?"

"Why, sir, his lordship was pleased as possible with it all

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the time Mr. Nelson was doing it ; but Mr. Nelson himself used to laugh about it to me and say, ' This picture will come back to me, Williams ; I shall never get paid for it ! ' And when I ventured to say I couldn't believe it (because it was the exact image of his lordship, wasn't it, sir ?), he would say, ' Ah, but he won't have it. He'll send it back after it's been exhibited and other people have seen it ! ' And then he'd chuckle and say, ' But it's worth it, Williams ; it's worth it ! ' "

" I can hear him. What happened ? "

" Mr. Nelson exhibited the portrait, you remember, at one of the galleries and called it ' A Philanthropist ' ; and there was a lot of comment on it in the papers. And at first, I understand, his lordship was delighted and used to take his friends to see it, and stand in front of it with them. And then, by what I can make out, he came to think Mr. Nelson and the gentlemen of the Press were laughing at him, and that the picture itself was what they call a satire. And he was wild then, and wrote a most abusive letter to Mr. Nelson, and ordered him to remove the picture from the gallery and said he wouldn't take it or pay for it, not if Mr. Nelson sued him in open court for the money. And Mr. Nelson used to laugh over his letters more than ever, and he'd show them to his friends and say, ' Oh, wasn't it worth it ! ' "

" I remember something about it, now. Did the picture come back ? "

" Yes, it did. Only last week. And it's about that I was going to tell you. You see, Mr. Nelson had expected it all along and seemed almost as if he would be pleased, in a way, at his words coming true. But when the picture actually did come he was put out, really angry about it. When he

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unpacked it I thought he would put his foot through it, and he said to me, 'This is the limit, the last straw! There's three hundred guineas worth of my time thrown away for telling a damned profiteer the truth about himself!' When you come to think of it, it was rather strange he should take it in that way, wasn't it, sir?"

"Yes," John said thoughtfully, and then, "Is that the portrait over there?"

"That's the one, sir. Mr. Nelson wouldn't let me take it into the studio. It's just as he left it."

John moved instinctively towards the place where the picture stood and looked at it; then in spite of his pre-occupation, laughed. There was no riot of colour in this work of Harold's. In dark clothes against a shadowed background his lordship emerged, sombre, mean, avaricious, the characteristics of his race cruelly accentuated. The nose was the curved beak of a vulture, the hands claw-like as talons, the mouth a cruel trap. A more pitiless face could not be imagined. In the man's bearing, however, there was a certain triumph and swagger; he was just turning from his desk on which lay a strip of paper, pink and white, evidently a cheque, while in his hand he flourished the golden penholder with which he had signed his name. In his buttonhole was an impossibly large wild-rose, manufactured in satin, and of the kind now associated with hospital charities. The pink of the rose and the pink of the cheque were the same; and the eye was attracted from the one to the other, as the painter maliciously intended it should be.

"I had forgotten it was quite so obvious," John said. "I don't wonder his lordship wouldn't have it! But you think it was losing the money that annoyed Mr. Nelson?"

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"He said, 'Everything comes at once!' Not joking, as it seems to me now. I remember, too, he sat at his table there the other night, turning over some cheque-books and making lists of figures on a piece of paper. That wasn't like him, either. He never would keep any accounts, you know, and I couldn't get him to look at my books, though I can show you that I kept them regular and strictly. I often used to think he'd have let me cheat him out of hundreds of pounds and never discovered it."

"I know you were a splendid friend to him, Williams, and that makes it all the more incomprehensible to me that he should never have betrayed himself to you if he did meditate a step of this sort."

"It wouldn't be premeditated, sir. Not with Mr. Nelson. It was a sudden impulse, if it wasn't an accident."

"I think that, too; but *something* must have led up to it. These papers he was turning over, are we likely to find anything amongst them? Or has he been burning or destroying anything?"

"Nothing of the sort, sir. You see how things are left . . . nothing in this room as though he meant other than to come back again."

"There is not," John said, and smiled and sighed. He knew the place well, and it all looked exactly as usual.

"Was there anyone . . . any visitor of late?"—he hesitated—"well, anyone who might have been getting money out of him?"

"I can't think of anyone," the man said. "He hasn't had many visitors just lately. Not even Dr. Cathcart, who used to come very often. I was remarking only the other day to Mr. Nelson that we hadn't seen the doctor for quite a

while, and he said he saw him when he went to your house. He's been at your studio so much lately."

"Yes," John said, and snatching at the opportunity for which he had been longing, he turned to the mantelpiece and took down one of the photographs. They were differing studies of the same person, if person it could be rightly called ; for with the head, arms, and shoulders of a beautiful woman it combined a snake-like form defined in glittering scales. The white face, dark brows, artificially lengthened and drawn together till they almost met in a V above the narrowed eyes, were familiar enough to John. But the poise of the withdrawn head and the baleful expression on the face were strange. "We've both been painting this young lady. I expect you know who it is ? "

"Oh yes, sir," the man answered, hardly looking at the card ; "it's Phyllis Brown, the film star. Mr. Nelson spoke a lot about her."

"He admired her very much ? "

"Yes ; he used to say she was a perfect type of . . . I can't recall the word now."

"Did you ever see her ? " John asked, trying to sound careless.

"I saw her one day last January. She came to tea in the studio when Mr. Nelson had a party of people. Weren't you here, sir ? "

"No ; Miss Franklin and I were away for part of January."

"I noticed her particularly, because I'd heard a lot of her looks—her being in that picture just then—' Lamia ' she was called, I think, and the piece was ' The Serpent Tempted Him '—but I was rather disappointed in her myself. Handsome, of course, but so quiet ; not a word to say. I remember

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I remarked on it to Dr. Cathcart, who noticed those photos up there, one day ; and he said : ' A snake often is quiet enough until it strikes.' And of course that's true, isn't it, sir ? Though I wasn't referring to her in her professional aspect."

" There was a party here the day she came. Can you remember anyone else who was present ? "

" Mr. Nelson's cousin, Lady Arlington, acted hostess for him : I remember that because Mr. Nelson told me beforehand she was coming. He said, ' I've got to be very correct and well-behaved to-day, Williams. I shall have a chaperon ! "

" And the other guests . . . ? "

" I think they all wrote their names in Mr. Nelson's Visitors'-book on the little writing-table in the studio ; you'll find it there."

" Miss Brown came alone ? " John said, looking closely at the photograph, and trying to discover beneath the artificial lines and shadows the face of the girl as he himself knew it.

" Quite alone ; I let her in myself. It was the first time I had seen her, but I recognised her at once from her pictures. She slipped in amongst the other people very quietly. Something unusual in her way of walking—I don't know if you've noticed it, sir ; somehow gliding, or would you say sinuous ? I thought at once that was why they chose her for that part of the snake-woman."

" I know what you mean," John said, and for some reason his heart sank. " And that was in January ? " and he fell into thought. But he could not bring himself to ask any more questions about Miss Brown. The man's manner had been so wholly without special interest or suspicion that

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his own pride revolted from arousing them. He put down the photograph and turned to another subject.

"Williams, you remember that at one time Mr. Nelson and Dr. Cathcart were very much interested about some experiments connected with poisons and poison-gas?"

"Oh yes, sir. We were all interested. Mr. Nelson often asked me to come in and talk with them on the subject."

"And do you think he ever tried to carry out any of those experiments on his own account?"

"No, sir. Never, that I know of."

"You see, if he *had*; if he thought they had discovered some wonderful antidote . . . anything of that sort . . . it might have been . . ."

The idea was evidently entirely new to the batman, and he was silent as if turning it over and trying to fit it into any relation with known facts. When he looked up his face was unconvinced.

"I can't think it, Mr. Franklin: I never saw him handle any chemicals at all except those he used for his photography. All the apparatus belonging to that is in the other sitting-room which the Inspector locked up."

"And those last two days . . . was there anything in his manner on either Monday or Tuesday that you remember particularly? Anything unusual?"

"He did seem a bit moody and put out, sir. I noticed it on Tuesday morning, as if he had something on his mind."

"You can't tell me more than that?"

"He was short in his way of speaking; well, he didn't seem to want to talk at all, that's the nearest way I can put it."

"Do you think he had any letter that morning that worried him?"

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"If he had he tossed it on to the table there. I saw him do that when he looked through his post. I don't think he kept anything back."

"He left my house fairly early on Monday evening," John hesitated as he spoke: "At about nine o'clock, I think. Did he come straight back here?"

"I was out on Monday evening, sir. I came in at midnight. Mr. Nelson was then in his room."

"You were out!" John repeated. "So that if anyone had called . . . or if—if anyone had dropped a note or a parcel in the letter-box you would know nothing about it?"

"Nothing, sir; but I saw no signs of there having been a visitor."

"Can you remember at what time he left here on Tuesday morning?"

"His usual time; just about twenty minutes to ten."

"And he was with me soon after ten. Did he say anything about the time he would return?"

"He told me he was lunching with you and wasn't sure about dinner. He might be home or he might not. Said he would ring me up and tell me later. Just like that. Quite careless and off-hand. I can't think he was acting, Mr. Franklin. It hadn't that appearance. I feel sure I should have noticed if there had been anything different from usual."

John sat silent, thinking deeply. He seemed to have got nowhere, to have laid definite hold on nothing. Money? An accident? The quarrel with Muriel? Another woman? All seemed equally possible . . . Or equally impossible . . .

All through his talk with the batman he had been half aware of the presence of Mr. Turner moving about the flat and pausing occasionally outside the door of the room in which

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they were talking. This room formed one of the suite adjoining Harold's gorgeous studio, a suite which comprised a second sitting-room (used as a sort of dumping store for everything and anything that did not lie about elsewhere), his bedroom, bathroom, and the kitchen department which also included the batman's tiny bedroom. The whole suite was clean and well-kept, but only the latter part of it was tidy. All the other rooms were littered with artistic impedimenta. Canvases, sketches, half-finished sketches, half-finished studies were jostled amongst paints and brushes, tools and papers. Everywhere lay evidence of the character of the man, strong, gifted, of boundless vitality, undisciplined, impatient, "but incapable of secrecy, surely," was John's summary. Yet was this very impatience perhaps the key to the problem? Had a crisis arisen which Harold would not bring himself to face?

"Mr. Franklin, sir," the batman now timidly interrupted; "I . . . I've been wanting all the time to ask you . . . Miss Muriel . . .? how has she borne this shock? Was it . . . was it as unexpected to her . . .?"

"Oh, Williams, I think it was even more so. She's absolutely overwhelmed as you can understand. She—she blames herself for some little misunderstanding they had on Monday—but I can't think it was only that——"

"I'll never believe it!" was the batman's indignant answer. "Mr. Nelson was a gentleman; he'd never act that way whatever reason she might have given. Oh dear, poor young lady . . . it's enough to kill her without her trying to think she was to blame. I only hope the papers won't get hold of any such notion. But Dr. Cathcart, sir, what does he say?"

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"I think we all feel the same, Williams. He's as mystified as any of us: doesn't know what to think or how to account for it."

The Inspector now came definitely forward; "I'm afraid we must be getting to work, Mr. Franklin."

"Yes, yes," John said, recollecting. "Williams, I'll see you again. We shall meet at the court this afternoon and after that I'll have another talk with you."

"Can't I get you something, sir," the man begged; "it's a dusty, tiring job going through the papers. A glass of sherry? . . . biscuits?"

"That'll be splendid, Williams; bring them at twelve."

For the first time a smile came to the poor fellow's face and he went from the room.

"You've heard something of what he's been telling me?" John said.

"Most of it," Mr. Turner replied calmly. "You've rendered valuable assistance to me, sir. Nothing could have been more helpful."

"Oh!" John said, taken aback. "I hadn't been thinking of that."

"No, sir; that's just why."

He moved as he spoke towards the big kneehole table which stood parallel to the wall with its two large windows. At the mere sight of the table, covered as it was with papers, letters, circulars, loose envelopes, bills, receipts and cards of every description John's heart sank.

"Turner, how shall we ever tackle all this?"

"You get a chair and sit on that side of the knee-hole and I'll sit on this, where the drawers are. Now, sir, you know we can only go through things in a cursory way this morning."

Suppose you take what's on the top and sort all this stuff into heaps. Arrange them as you like—private letters in one heap,—pamphlets and notices in another, bills and the like in another . . . just as you choose. Run your eye over them and if they refer in any pressing way to money, let me know ; or make a note of it. Here are some papers I found in the bedroom ; take those first."

"You've been through all the rooms ?" John ventured, as he took his chair and received the small package.

"Through every hole and corner except the studio. I thought you'd do that with me. I've not found a trace of chemicals except amongst his photographic outfit. And they were dusty, not touched for some time, I should say. I've left them as they were, in the other sitting-room. There are paints and varnishes and that sort of thing, of course ; but nothing more. No sign of poisons for any other purpose."

"Turner, what do you really think of it all ; what do you make of things ?"

"Why nothing as yet, sir ;" the Inspector said, calmly. "I haven't begun to touch the facts, so far. This is just the tart."

John could not resist one more question, though he had imitated his friend and was already hastily scanning and sorting documents.

"Have you heard anything of Dr. Cathcart and how he fared yesterday ? I rang him up twice last evening but he wasn't at his laboratory apparently and I couldn't get him."

Mr. Turner was opening the drawers on each side of the knee-hole, examining the contents, noting, setting in order, closing, locking up again. "Yes," he said in the midst of this, "I saw Dr. Cathcart himself last night."

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"You did? Had he any news for you? Heard anything?"

"Nothing. No success at all. But he had worked like a hero . . . advertised the facts, interviewed the police, questioned all sorts of people, done everything possible. He was down there till the early hours of the morning. I was astounded at his energy and resource. I wish he had been successful."

"You attach a good deal of importance to this business about the ring?"

"I do in a way. But I wasn't thinking so much of that. I was sorry for Dr. Cathcart's disappointment."

"Ah—you're beginning to feel about him as I do. He's a pathetic sort of fellow, isn't he? It gets at one's heart."

"Yes, he is that. Pathetic. It goes through everything connected with him."

"How do you mean, everything?"

"Well, I was thinking of that wretched place where he lodges . . ."

"Oh, you saw the place? He has never let me do that. You remember he used to have a house of his own in Tregunter Square, quite a nice place; but he gave it up to be nearer his beloved laboratory. I was sure the rooms in River Street must be wretched, but he said he spent all his time at the laboratory and talked as if this was only a temporary arrangement. He cares for nothing but his research work, you know; not a thought besides."

"Is he well off? I suppose he has some private means, as he doesn't practise now."

"He must have. But I expect he spends every penny on his laboratory."

"Ah yes; that would account for it."

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"Account for what? Oh, those beastly rooms where he sleeps. Are they very awful?"

"I didn't see his rooms; but it's a dirty, neglected house and the man who opened the door to me, his landlord, was a surly half-drunk fellow. I asked him if Dr. Cathcart were in and he said 'No, and he didn't know when he would be in, and didn't care. Didn't care if he never set eyes on him again.'"

"What a shame!" John cried. "I wish we could get Ernest away. I wish he had someone like Williams to look after him. He isn't fit to look after himself. I wonder if he ever has a decent meal?"

"Not in that house, I should think."

"I wish I had realised it before," John said, annoyed. "But you should see his laboratory!"

"I have seen it."

"But how? When?"

"I called there twice after I had been to the lodgings; I was so anxious to hear how he'd got on with his search. The second time was after midnight and I saw a light in the window and found Dr. Cathcart there."

"You bearded the lion in his den and got admitted?"

"Yes. I got him to let me in, in spite of the hour."

"Do tell me about it. Was he friendly?"

"No; I can't say that he was friendly."

"Hostile?"

"Not quite that. But he's on the defensive with me. Hates my butting in to all this trouble. Thinks I'm only here to pry and then make everyone's affairs public."

"I know; he's morbidly sensitive. But he'll get over that when he finds what a friend you are. And you'll find

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what a friend *he* can be, too. So you saw his laboratory : isn't it a fine place ? ”

“ It is. But it would be finer if he kept it better,”

“ You don't mean to tell me the laboratory looked neglected ? ” cried out John ; “ Why, he keeps it like a new pin ! I've been and found it so a score of times.”

“ Everything was thick with dust as far as I could see——”

“ It's this business about Harold,” John declared in distress ; “ Ernest has taken it all to heart in that silent brooding way of his. And there's something he knows and doesn't like to tell us. I'm sure of it. Did you succeed at all in getting his confidence ? ”

“ No : though I tried hard too,—tried to get him to talk about his research-work : these ideas of his that might be of such value.”

“ And he wouldn't talk ? ”

“ No ; or rather he put me off, saying he had nothing to tell, that his researches were useless, no good at all, a failure.”

“ Oh, he's lost heart, just as he might be on the point of success ! That's so like him. He can't believe in himself and he'll throw it all up in despair.”

“ That's the impression he gave me ; that he had lost heart and meant to abandon the whole thing.”

“ But he mustn't ! He must be stopped,” John cried. “ Oh, if only this miserable business were over and I could have a good talk with him ! I can't bear to think of his losing the results of all these years of work. Turner, I wonder . . . I wonder . . . ”

“ Yes, sir ? ”

“ You heard what Williams said just now about Harold being in money difficulties ? I wonder if Ernest had lent

him money, and now thinks he will never get it back ? Knows why Harold was in that position and won't tell us because it might reflect badly on him ? It would be exactly like Ernest ; and it would explain many things. I thought at one time that it was the other way about, that Harold, being the richer helped to finance Ernest's work. But I may be quite wrong there. Turner, you have been totting down figures : can you make anything of the sort out of them."

" I think this is an idea that's well worth looking into, sir," the Inspector said with a very thoughtful air. " It would as you say explain a lot—a lot that looks strange now. You spoke of a coldness between the two lately . . . of Mr. Nelson talking as though he had no friends, no money. This may have been at the bottom of it. It would explain Dr. Cathcart's unwillingness to speak out, too. He may have pressed for a return of the loan. I suppose a gentleman of Mr. Nelson's habits would have been as indifferent about borrowing as he was about spending ? Mr. Franklin, I can't help thinking we've got on the right track."

He had arranged on the table before him several piles of cheque-books and pass-books, and on a piece of paper had already noted several items. He began to run his pencil quickly down these, checking them by reference to the cash-accounts, adding, dividing, calculating with absorbed intensity.

John meanwhile tried to continue his own job, arranging in piles the bills, the business-letters, the cards of invitation, the various notices of picture-exhibitions, of lectures, of advertisement, the private letters, the endless circulars, the begging letters, letters from money-lenders, from betting agents

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"I wonder if Harold has been betting much lately?" he said.

"Was he in the habit of doing so?"

"I believe he was at one time; but he assured me, of his own accord, he should give it up when he married."

Mr. Turner groaned suddenly. "Nothing but bearer-cheques!"

"Yes, I know he generally used bearer-cheques. That's a nuisance. You won't trace them easily."

"Take weeks," the Inspector said and began to turn the leaves of a cheque-book; "and the counterfoils either not filled in at all, or filled with initials or hieroglyphs. Even with the Bank's help this will be a job,—a long job!"

"I've come on something at last," John said; "see here, Turner. A letter from the agent of that house Harold meant to take,—I told you about that. This is a note expostulating with him for drawing back at the last moment when the agreement was practically made. Doesn't that rather tend to prove what we were thinking?"

"Mr. Nelson's been spending money lately at an extraordinary rate. I think something quite unusual has happened somewhere. It was his custom to keep a balance of about five hundred pounds on his current-account, and during the last three weeks he's overdrawn that."

"But what's it all been on, Turner? I can't find any considerable bills here. Not one pressing him specially for money. Do the counterfoils give you any idea where it went?"

"I can't read half of them," Mr. Turner said; "and these initials: can you help me, sir? I presume E. W. would be Williams the batman; that account occurs every

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other week and is settled regularly, always about the same amount ; and nothing out of the way."

" Oh, Williams is a Welshman, he's sure to be called Evan. But who is E. L. ? Who's G. M. ? "

" That's the one that's puzzling me most ; that last one. E.L. may be Electric Light ; that occurs quarterly you see and would be quite reasonable. And this I presume might be the coal-account ; and this his wine merchant. Nothing extravagant in any of them. Blakie and Crane are the people who supply his painting materials ; that would be ' Bl. and Cr., ' I take it. But who can this G. M. be ? "

" Does it occur often ? "

" It's a steady out-going somewhere every quarter ; and its been going on for a long time,—for several years, in fact. Have you come across any letters signed by such initials ? "

" None, I think. Who could he pay in that way each quarter ? Why, the sums are enormous ! "

" They make the only really big account he has. Someone has been bleeding him steadily for years."

" Bleeding him for years ? " John said as he studied the figures, " What can it mean, Turner ? "

" If we could find out—" the Inspector murmured.

" Can it . . . can it be a case of blackmail ? "

" It's what it looks like, sir. It's what had already occurred to me."

" But who would try to blackmail a man like Harold ? He'd never have stood it for a moment."

" You know of no one who had any claim on him ? "

" No one at all. He seemed quite frank and open about his affairs when he spoke to me . . . but of course I don't know very much about his past. He had hosts of friends and

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got endless begging-letters ; but I've come across nothing that corresponds to a continuous claim on him."

"He never contracted any very large debt, or obligation, did he, which he might be paying off gradually?"

"I can't imagine he would have lived and carried on as he did, if that were the case. This flat and his studio aren't of the cheap, economical kind."

"Well, I'll make a note of that and we'll return to it presently. Now here is a cheque drawn for five-hundred pounds only last week, and the counterfoil is marked 'Mac.' Do you know who that might be?"

"No, I can't say off-hand that I do."

"There's something else on the counterfoil. That five hundred pounds was apparently made up of four items ; at least there are four separate sums added together, do you see—scribbled here on the counterfoil—£50, £150, £250 and £50 again. Now that should tell us something. And made out to a man called Mac-something. Now I wonder. It looks to me rather like a betting account. And 'Mac' . . . now could that be a bookmaker? Let me see . . . Mac Donald . . ."

"Is there a bookmaker called MacDonald?"

"I think there may be between two and three hundred," Mr. Turner said, reaching for the telephone-book ; "H'm, yes, this doesn't help much."

"Can 'Mac' be the same as G. M.?"

"I wonder. It appears suddenly by itself in the third week of May, this last week ; and the payments to G. M. come regularly within a few days of each quarter-day, the last being March the 29th. I'm inclined to think this account with 'Mac' is something different altogether. There's

another large cheque drawn in the same week, too,—no name at all on the counterfoil there. But why was Mr. Nelson paying out two big sums like that in one week, I wonder ? ”

“ And to whom ? ”

Mr. Turner began a steady re-perusal of the counterfoils. “ Ah, what’s this ? ” he said suddenly. “ Here’s the payment to G. M. made out rather differently ; here’s a name here. Can you read it ? Here’s the G. and the M—but what follows the M ? Don’t hurry. This is important.”

“ Is it ‘ Marks ’ ? ” John said at last.

“ That’s what I made it : or it might be Macks. That looks as though it were the same person as ‘ Mac ’ ; yet somehow I don’t fancy it is. G. M., whoever he or she may be, receives the same amount each quarter . . . This little account with ‘ Mac ’ seems something extra . . . Marks . . . The name suggests nothing to you, sir ? ”

“ Nothing ; no one.”

“ It looks to me . . . it looks very much as though it was a case of blackmail, or some continuous claim on Mr. Nelson and as though he had been trying to raise a lump sum to pay it off last week. He may have tried to raise the money by backing horses : I think this five-hundred pounds made up in that way looks rather like it. And he may have borrowed money of Dr. Cathcart . . . But I think he must have lost heavily somewhere and got himself into worse difficulties. And if he didn’t confide the whole truth to his friend it’s possible Dr. Cathcart may have been in want of money and asked for it . . . And now he may shrink from letting the truth be known.”

“ He must be made to speak,” John said with a sigh.

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"I'm afraid he knows a great deal more about poor Harold than he has ever let us suspect. I've always wanted him to say more. I'm afraid there's something behind all this that'll create a scandal. Ernest has hinted as much already."

"Now, Mr. Franklin, don't take that as proved. We've proved nothing. It's pure conjecture on my part. The position stands like this. Mr. Nelson was a man who took no account of money ; and somehow or other he had contracted a debt or obligation to someone whom he describes on these counterfoils as G. M. or G. Mack, or possibly G. Marks ; and this has cost him in all quite a third of his income. And just lately he's been plunging in some way,—paying out large lump-sums, with no corresponding returns. In short he was for the moment in money-difficulties. But had he been able to get rid of this incubus, this G. M., and been ordinarily careful for the next six months he could easily have righted himself. No difficulty whatever,—with the orders he was receiving and the prices he could command for his pictures."

"If he could have got rid of this G. M." John repeated. "But what if he could not ?"

"Well, that's what we have got to discover. And now, sir, we'll stop here for this morning. I've just jotted down the main facts on this piece of paper. Put it in your pocket and the first good opportunity you get, speak to Dr. Cathcart openly about it and make him speak openly to you. Tell him what we've discovered and ask him to tell you what he knows."

"You think it would come better from me than from you?"

"Incalculably better, sir, in every way. But I must ask you to say nothing at present to anyone else. Don't suggest any complications to this poor fellow, Williams, for instance,

before he gives his evidence this afternoon. Let him speak simply and openly from his own actual knowledge of his master. We haven't one single fact as yet to support our theories and we should only confuse and terrify the man if we started cross-examining him just now. There's time enough for that later. And now I just want you for form's sake to give a look round the other rooms, and then we'll go to the studio. I know you're tired out, sir ; so we'll be as quick as possible and then you shall get home and have a rest before you come to court."

" You won't come back with me ? "

" No, sir ; I must see Mr. Nelson's solicitor again before this afternoon."

John got up still deep in thought and followed the inspector. Without speaking the latter took him to the bedroom, opened the door wide and motioned to him to step within.

The room, untouched since the morning of Tuesday when the batman had set it in order after his master's departure, kept all the still and intimate reminders of the waking and sleeping life of its owner, and every detail as he regarded it seemed to strike at John's heart ; the clothes lying on the chair, the brushes on the dressing-table, the sketches pinned to the wall, the photographs in their frames . . . all made his breath catch in his throat. He stood unhappy, uneasy, held by the spell.

" Not a sign anywhere of anything unusual," the Inspector said, and John could have thanked him almost with tears for his lowered voice and quiet respect of manner. He shook his head and glanced again at the photographs. There was one of Muriel on a little table beside the bed ; one of himself on

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the mantelpiece ; two or three others that he did not recognise.

The Inspector stepped back into the passage and John roused himself and turned away also.

" You won't care to see the kitchen and bathroom," Mr. Turner said. " I've been through them all once ; it's the same everywhere. The batman's bedroom and all. The only chemicals on the premises are in this room, as I told you, and they are just the ordinary ones for photography." The second room made John smile ; it was hardly possible to enter it for the accumulation stacked within.

They moved on to the studio and in that beautiful room flooded with light, and eloquent of the artist, John's heart was pierced again, though his sorrow now was for the tragedy of unfulfilled promise, the cutting-short of such a life. He moved towards the pictures, some half-dry and half-finished ; each glorious in colour, daring in conception ; a vital witness of the creator. John was filled with wonder and sadness. " He would have found himself, disciplined himself in a year or two's time. That was all he needed,—just discipline and patience. He had all the real stuff, sense of line, sense of colour, feeling. He might have done anything Turner, how could he throw away such a gift ? It seems impossible . . . impossible."

" It's like all the rest, sir ; difficult to understand. Unless it was, as you say, want of patience, want of control over a sudden impulse."

" I've never had anything like his gifts," John mused.

" Oh, sir," the Inspector protested ; " that isn't true. Your pictures are beautiful. These of Mr. Nelson's . . .

well, they may be all you say ; but some of them seem to me ugly. As if he enjoyed ugliness, too . . .”

“ No, no, Turner,” John said ; “ You don’t understand ! Well,” and he glanced round and round the beautiful disordered room, so unlike his own neat studio ; “ there seems no reason to stay long here. There are no chemicals, nothing to help us to a solution of the mystery. Rather the reverse ! ”

Mr. Turner went to a small writing-table set at one corner of the studio. An inkstand with pens stood upon it, and in front of them a large ornamental blotting-book. Beside these lay a massive volume on the cover of which was stamped in gold the single word “ Visitors.”

The Inspector began to turn over its pages quietly and quickly, giving John a glance of invitation to join him.

“ You’ll know some of these names, perhaps, sir. Here’s the entry for January that Williams spoke of.” John took the book from his hands and began to mutter through a list of names, while the Inspector now turned over the leaves of the blotter.

“ Helen Arlington ; that’s Lady Arlington, some kind of cousin,” John said. “ Walter Brayling, John Hill, George Vincent, Alec Dune : here we are, *Phyllis Brown*, Tony Luttrell, Edith Vicars, Grierson-Smith, Hubert Carruthers, John Bentley—I don’t know half these people. Hill and Vincent and Grierson-Smith are artist-friends ; but I haven’t a notion who Hubert Carruthers and John Bentley and this lot may be.”

Mr. Turner had come upon a half-sheet of note-paper and stood reading it ; then he turned it over, re-read it ; then handed it to John. It was an unfinished note in Harold’s writing, begun perhaps with one of the very dilapidated pens

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on the inkstand before them, and with ink of a quality to correspond ; for the last words showed thick and spluttered, and perhaps for this reason the composition had been abandoned. The whole was untidy, and but half-legible, like the rest of Harold's documents, and John had some difficulty in making it out at all :—

“ Beauteous Cleopatra,

If the Bank of England refuses to be accommodating, then do I beg of you fall back on my alternative suggestion. Why these wretched scruples about what other people think and say? Your out-of-date notions about loyalty——”

Here it broke off.

John's head by this time was aching so fiercely that the words made no sense at all, and he stared at them stupidly, seeing them perhaps ; but seeing more plainly still, the white face in the photograph he had studied ; the white face and the narrowed glittering eyes with their hypnotising cruel stare.

“ This girl ! everywhere this girl. What *can* she have to do with all the trouble ? ”

“ Why, perhaps nothing, sir.”

“ Turner, you know you don't think that. You know she is somehow mixed up with it.”

“ No ; I know nothing at all until it's proved,” the Inspector said ; “ and now, please, sir, put that aside for the present and think no more about it. It's waste of time and we haven't any to spare. Let us get back now, and do nothing more until we're through with this afternoon's business.”

His manner was so decided and John was so tired that he

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obeyed mechanically. In silence the two men left the studio and the flat, a silence only broken by their brief farewells to the batman. Outside the door they parted and went their different ways, each pondering over the question of blackmail, each wondering who 'G. M.' could be.

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CHAPTER VII

THE INQUEST

It seemed to John that he had been sitting for hours in the dreary little court, and that the whole time was one long nightmare. Everything about the sordid ugly surroundings was familiar, with the familiarity of things dreamed of or imagined, and now actually experienced, but all the time horribly unreal. He was here in the flesh, he was awake ; live people were about him, he could see their faces, hear their voices ; they passed before him, behind him, even addressed him, and yet he could not believe in them. Things happened as he knew beforehand they would happen ; someone had even asked his name and shown him where to sit. That group of keen-faced young men who looked at him and whispered about him to each other must be press-men. They doubtless believed themselves to be real, but to John they were phantoms or at best only actors in a play that meant nothing, had no reality behind it, and must come to an end sooner or later, when he himself would be able to shake off the illusion and walk away and forget the whole thing.

That sour-looking man who cleared his throat before he spoke and repeated everyone's words as a question, he was the coroner ; and those stolid staring creatures, were they the jurors ? Creatures who had somehow formed themselves, perhaps by some process called " swearing in," into a solid

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group, all bound together by a common interest; some feeling which compelled them to sit together and frown and take notes and steal looks in his direction and then look hurriedly away.

One or two faces he recognised definitely. His nephew, Arthur Bertram, had come, and now sat beside him, and beyond Arthur was Harold's batman, poor Williams, looking sad and nervous. These two, of course, like himself, were spectators, and when the mumming was over John would be able to walk home with them and discuss the wretched performance. When it was over!

Harold's solicitor and his own he recognised, too, and the latter had nodded to him, though without a smile. John remembered now that it had been very awkward, very awkward indeed for both solicitors to attend this thing called an "inquest" at such short notice. They had apparently been hustled and ordered about in a very incongruous manner by Scotland Yard. . . . But surely that had been days ago . . . weeks ago? The heavy atmosphere of the court made him feel stupid and drowsy . . . and he had not slept since . . . since when? Had he fallen asleep at last and was this a long tortuous dream from which he could not wake?

Odd! Perhaps he had better make a great effort and get rid of the nightmare. He started and shook himself. The preliminaries were over; the coroner and note-takers had "resumed their places" and were settling to their task. The first remarks were addressed to the solicitors, and were delivered and answered in stilted phrases of which John hardly caught the meaning. Inspector Turner had spoken, too, in much the same way, in a low quick voice with many technicalities. John caught such words as "the body was

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lying in such and such a position," "the deceased was engaged as I understand," etc., etc.

No! He resolved not to listen, and turned his head away to study his neighbours. At this moment Ernest Cathcart, who had been all the time in court, pushed his way round and made a place for himself on John's other side. Someone in black, who was reading a newspaper and was hidden behind it, had been there until now though separated by a decided gap. John was surprised as he greeted him to notice that Ernest was, for the first time since he gave up his practice, in correct professional dress, a well-cut morning coat, with shining linen, and with a still more shining top-hat in his hand. He looked alert and eager, too, almost impatient, with an unusual colour in his face. John smiled at him and raised his eyebrows, but before Ernest could make any reply his name was called and he rose and left his seat.

Arthur Bertram, who had been whispering to the batman almost incessantly, now gave John a surreptitious nudge. "Good Gad, Uncle John, is that girl beyond you the one I drove in the car on Tuesday?"

John glanced sideways, and at the same moment a corner of the newspaper was lowered and he saw a white troubled face and Miss Brown's mysterious dark eyes. He was thunderstruck. Like his nephew he would hardly have recognised her, so ashy pale was the face, so worn and heavy the eyes; but incapable of discourtesy, he bowed, and a very slight bow was given in acknowledgment. Then the newspaper was raised again.

"But what in heaven's name is the meaning of the get-up?" Arthur whispered again. "She must want to be taken for the widow! Why Muriel herself couldn't——"

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John ventured another glance. She was dressed entirely in black, wrapped in a heavy cloak with a large black hat pulled down over her face, while round the hat was a black gauze scarf, crossed at the back and brought again about her throat so as to make her almost unrecognisable. His heart sank at the sight of her and at the word Arthur had used. "But she's an actress; this may be all a pose. As Turner says, we know nothing. I *won't* think of it!" And he turned and resolutely tried to drive his weary spirit to attend to the proceedings.

He was vaguely aware that the chemists' assistant, a white-faced youth in evident agitation, had spoken and had shown the coroner a large book which was studied first by him and then by the jurors. Something about the purchase of poison "on that very morning by the deceased." There was his signature. No attempt at disguise. The jury might accept it as genuine. No doubt at all that the deceased was Mr. Harold Nelson, the artist, and the purchaser in question. Knew him well by sight. Had served him before with poisons—on such a date, and on such another date. (Here the pages of the big book were turned over and examined.) No; had no idea why they were wanted. Thought the deceased had once mentioned that he was interested in some experiments involving the use of poisons. Could not remember the exact words. No. Was not his business to ask. No.

But now this youth had given place to Ernest, who was speaking with an ease and decision which was evidently making an impression on the coroner, and which stirred John to genuine attention and surprise. "Now I know I'm awake!" he thought. "Ernest's real, anyway—more real than usual. *He* won't talk that horrible jargon!"

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But on the contrary Ernest was as fluent as the others, and in exactly the same way, stating that "he was summoned on Tuesday afternoon soon after 4.30 by a phone call from Mr. Franklin's house. The deceased was quite dead when he arrived. Had identified the body," etc., etc. "Death must have been instantaneous and have taken place about five or six minutes previously. Yes, he was working in his laboratory which was quite near. He had rushed round instantly. Yes. Saw at once that death was due to prussic acid. Yes."

The questions and answers seemed to go on and on. John's mind sank again in utter weariness and stupor, till of a sudden the coroner's voice, sharpened and shriller, jerked him to attention.

"Do I understand you to say, Dr. Cathcart, that it is your considered opinion that this may *not* have been a case of suicide but of death by misadventure?"

"I am not prepared at the moment to give a considered opinion, but I believe it to be possible. More than that—probable." How firmly and with what authority Ernest spoke! John sat forward and stared at him.

The coroner, who had been looking back over some notes, and was clearing his throat automatically, stared at him, too.

"H'm, h'm. Misadventure, h'm. Now what leads you to express yourself in that way, Dr. Cathcart, if I may ask the question?"

"I knew the deceased personally. He was interested in the action of poisons, and often discussed experiments that I myself was undertaking in my laboratory. I think he may have misunderstood some formula which related to poisons and their antidotes. He may have fancied he could

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concoct such an antidote. It may have been so, and this may be the result of his mistake."

"H'm," the coroner said, looking again at his notes. "Prussic-acid found in the coat-pocket and purchased that very morning, h'm," and he glanced at the jurors, who were looking distinctly agitated at this new possibility.

"Neither the coat in which the poison was found, nor the poison itself was in the room at the time," Ernest said slowly and clearly, waiting after he had spoken to see that he was heard and noted. "Nor was there on the body, nor anywhere in the room itself, any visible means by which poison could have been self-administered."

"And you infer from that——?"

"From that I infer that the deceased was carrying on his person a capsule of some kind, probably constructed by himself and supposed by him to be harmless, or able to cause a temporary indisposition."

"But why should Mr. Nelson tamper with prussic-acid at all, or construct such a capsule?"

"I believe he was playing a practical joke," Ernest said quietly, but so calmly and firmly that for a moment it seemed that no one could grasp his meaning.

"That would be a rather extraordinary practical joke, surely?" the coroner said at last, and looked again at the jurors, who were all now staring at Ernest.

"It would be extraordinary unless one were acquainted with all the circumstances that led up to it, or unless one knew the character of the man and his mood at the moment."

"Well, perhaps you will give us some explanation, Dr. Cathcart."

"On the day in question Mr. Nelson and I both lunched

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with Mr. Franklin at his house in Chelsea. Mr. Nelson was in wild spirits, laughing and making sport of everything. He was joking about my discoveries with regard to poisons and their antidotes . . . he was playing the fool throughout the whole meal. At the end of it he burst into pretence sobbing . . . ”

“ About what ? ”

“ About nothing in particular that I remember, unless it was that he pretended the premium of the house he meant to take was higher than he expected. I left Mr. Franklin’s house before he did, but I believe that when he went away he called out some joke about getting hold of Cleopatra’s asp and using it on himself.”

“ You think, then, Dr. Cathcart,” the coroner said, after another pause, “ that this was actually meant as a piece of play-acting, and that it turned out fatally ? ”

“ I think it extremely probable.”

“ H’m,” the coroner said ; “ h’m.”

John’s heart was beating wildly. Was this the truth after all ? Did Ernest truly and indeed believe this ? Was it the case, then, that the discoveries of the morning were actually the nightmare and this the simple and obvious explanation—the true solution of the mystery ? Why had he never thought of it before ? It seemed so likely . . . so more than likely. And what relief it would bring if it could be proved ! . . . But could Ernest ever prove it ? Could anyone prove such a thing ?

A whisper was buzzing round the court. A pressman near John was saying : “ *Not* suicide ? ” and the jurors were knitting their brows in thought.

“ Silence,” the coroner said. “ Well, Dr. Cathcart, we

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shall have to investigate that theory of yours later. But just a moment. The deceased was a friend of yours? Are you aware of any reason why he should commit suicide?"

"None at all."

"None at all? H'm. No financial difficulties as far as you know?"

"As far as I know, none."

The coroner glanced aside at the solicitors. "Ah, h'm, I see. 'No time as yet to go in detail into the financial position.' H'm. 'Some temporary but inconsiderable embarrassments.' H'm. Mr. Nelson was making a good income, I believe?"

"He certainly was."

"You were, of course, aware of the fact that he was engaged to be married . . ."

"I was."

"And there was no trouble there that you know of? I mean," as Ernest flashed a cold enquiring glance at him, "I mean, he never spoke to you of any trouble in connection with his engagement?"

"He never spoke to me of anything of the sort."

"Ah, h'm," the coroner said, "thank you, Dr. Cathcart, that'll be all for the present."

A moment later John was touched on the shoulder by Inspector Turner, who whispered: "You now, sir"—and he started to his feet and found himself somehow occupying the place where Ernest had just been standing. "Surely *now* it will seem real," he thought. "They won't use those horrible phrases or expect them of me?"

But no—it was all to be gone through again; he found himself forced to reiterate the same facts in the words that

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the others had used ; words which, like the refrain of a song, got on his brain and repeated themselves over and over in spite of all efforts to rid himself of them. And then this new suggestion of Ernest's had thrown him into worse confusion than ever. He hardly knew what he said or what he ought to say.

"Now, Mr. Franklin ; you were actually present when this tragedy took place. Will you tell us exactly the sequence of the events ?" And he was stumbling through them, closely followed by the audience.

"H'm, yes," the coroner said, when all the facts seemed exhausted. "I see Miss Franklin is too ill to be present to-day. Very natural. Most terrible catastrophe, however it occurred. Has the sympathy of everyone present, I am sure." Here he glanced around him once more, and a murmur from his companions rose in answer. "But in her absence," he went on, "can you give us any information as to whether there had been any quarrel or misunderstanding between the deceased and the young lady ?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter *what* I say," John thought. "This is all a dream. These people aren't real. Why should I tell them anything ?"

Aloud he said : "No serious quarrel, I think. No."

"You say 'serious,' Mr. Franklin. Do you know if there had been a quarrel of any sort ?"

"They had some differences of opinion from time to time, of course—a difference of ideas, for instance, as to the house they meant to take."

"The *house* ?" repeated the coroner ; "is that all you can tell us ?"

"My daughter is at the moment suffering too much from shock to be questioned."

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"Yes, yes. Naturally. Of course. But to the best of your belief, then, there was no sort of trouble between these two young people such as might lead to . . . to this regrettable act?"

"To the best of my belief there was no such trouble."

"I understand that the deceased lunched with you, Mr. Franklin. You have heard Dr. Cathcart's report . . . you would corroborate it? Mr. Nelson was in this sort of wild play-acting mood as he states . . .?"

"He was; he was making a burlesque of everything that was said."

"You did not take him to be serious when he spoke of not being able to afford this house that has been mentioned?"

"Not in any way serious."

"And he left you shortly after two? Yes. You have no idea where he went then?"

"None at all."

"No. Just so. And he returned at half-past four. And was he still in these wild spirits, or did it seem to you as though anything might have happened in the meantime to upset him?"

"He came in quoting Shakespeare; just as he had been talking at lunch. It seemed to me that he was in exactly the same sort of mood. But I was painting at the time; I hardly noticed."

"Ah, yes. And this tragedy occurred immediately after he came in. H'm." The coroner looked once more at the jury. "Do you think there is any chance that Miss Franklin would be able to attend the court in, say, a week's time?"

"I think so," John said, adding to himself, "but I hope to God she will not."

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"Then that's all for the present, thank you, Mr. Franklin."

There was a moment's pause. The coroner turned to the solicitors and asked a question. Poor Williams, the batman, was called upon now, and John went back towards the place where he had been sitting. Ernest had moved down and was close to Arthur Bertram, the two whispering together. The sombre figure behind the newspaper was isolated. She was alone; the only woman amongst them. John had not realised this before, and shame and chivalry burnt within him. Without paying the slightest heed to the other two, he went to her side. Be she whatever she might, he felt in a sense responsible for her, and he would not ignore that responsibility.

"Are you quite alone, Miss Brown?" he said. "I'm so sorry I did not notice that before."

The newspaper was lowered, and the girl looked at him, startled. Her eyes were large and frightened, her lip trembled in spite of the desperate control she was putting on herself. John was to remember that look for long afterwards, but at the moment he was only perplexed by it. There was always something enigmatic about this girl.

"Yes, I'm alone," was all she said, then put up her hand to draw her cloak higher round her throat. Perhaps she did not desire to be recognised.

"Let me do that for you," John said, touching the cloak. "I wish I had known you had no one with you. This must be very trying for you. I wish you could have been spared it. I have been thinking of you very often and hoping you had not been made ill by such a shock."

She gave him another quick look, and her face was so white, her eyes so heavy and swollen that he could hardly

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bear to see her. "She hasn't slept, either," he thought. "Where has she been? What can have happened to her?" And before he could consider what he was saying the words broke from him: "Can't I do anything for you? I'm so distressed—so very sorry——" Sorry for what? He dared not think, dared not answer himself.

"Miss Brown," whispered Inspector Turner behind her, "they are asking for you. Come this way."

She got quickly to her feet, and John rose at the same instant and would have gone with her, but with a sharp movement she swept past him and was in her place; tall, white-faced, tragic, more like a statue than a living woman.

The effect of her sudden appearance was instantaneous. The jurors, reporters, onlookers, even the coroner himself, even the case-hardened court-attendants, started and pressed forward, those at the back jostling and pushing for a better sight. Her name was repeated, whispered, taken up, and the words, "It's the cinema girl!" added with variations.

"She's got the chance of her life now," Arthur Bertram muttered. "She must be in her element. She's played in this sort of scene before. She'll be able to show us all how it should be done."

The whole atmosphere of the court was changed, galvanised into life, and in the midst of it, unmoved and unmoving, the girl stood, her face turned as much as possible from the public, almost hidden, in fact, by the brim of her hat and the scarf at her throat.

"A good stunt that," Arthur whispered; "heighten the mystery."

John would not hear him. He was wondering whether

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the pause she made before giving her name was the pause she always made ; or was it longer than usual ? She spoke so low that she could hardly be heard at all, but he caught the address, " Albion Street Hotel." Every word seemed to be dragged from her against her will.

The coroner, who appeared a little disconcerted by the steady gaze of the great dark eyes, hesitated for the first time, and fidgetted with the notes in front of him.

" I'm afraid I have to question you on a very painful subject, Miss Brown, but I understand you were present when this tragedy took place ? "

" Yes."

" In fact, I understand that Mr. Nelson was actually painting a picture of you at——"

" No."

" *Not* painting you ? "

" It was Mr. John Franklin who was painting—painting *my portrait*." The last two words were given with such emphasis and so clearly that everyone was startled.

" But I understood that Mr. Nelson also was painting you ? "

" Mr. Franklin was painting my portrait," she repeated firmly. " Mr. Nelson came to Mr. Franklin's studio and made a sketch at the same time."

The coroner looked as though there were some discrepancy somewhere. " Let me see," he murmured ; " you are not a professional mod——"

" I have no profession ! " she cut in sharply and clearly as before.

" Oh," the coroner said. " H'm," and stopped short. " I see. Yes. Well, I am correct, am I not, in stating that

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at the moment of this sad occurrence Mr. Nelson was actually engaged on this p . . . sketch of you ? ”

“ I cannot say.”

“ I beg your pardon ? ”

“ Mr. Franklin had been painting me from three o'clock to half-past four. Mr. Nelson did not come in till then.”

“ You mean you do not know whether he had actually begun to paint or not ? ”

“ I have no idea.”

“ Ah,” the coroner said. “ H'm. Yes. I understand you were not in a position to see what took place ? ”

“ I saw nothing.”

Every word she uttered increased the mystery.

“ Well, will you kindly give us any facts you *can* ? ” the coroner said, with sarcasm, at last.

“ Mr. Nelson came into the studio at half-past four and walked straight to his easel. I had been invited to tea in the studio by *Miss Franklin*, after my sitting, and as tea was brought in just then, I went to the tea-table and helped her to dispense it. My back was to Mr. Nelson. I was not looking at him. But suddenly I heard——” Her voice broke, in spite of her efforts to control it, and a murmur arose from the audience. John felt his heart throbbing violently. The coroner with a sound of sympathy would have spoken——

“ I heard a cry,” she went on, forcing down the sob, “ and then a fall . . . and Mr. Nelson . . . Mr. Nelson was on the floor and his easel . . . had fallen with him. That is all I know.”

There was a silence, the coroner evidently wished to spare her, and repeated, “ I'm afraid this is very painful

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for you. Let us leave that. I believe you were at lunch at Mr. Franklin's house on Tuesday ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ And the deceased was also there ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Were you well acquainted with Mr. Nelson ? ”

“ No.”

“ He had, however, been painting this—this sketch of you for some weeks ; that would mean a certain amount of acquaintanceship ? ”

“ I saw him at Mr. Franklin's studio. Yes.”

“ But you knew little of him apart from that ? ”

“ Nothing at all.”

There was a curious dead silence after these words.

“ Did you know him well enough,” the coroner said at last, “ to be able to judge whether he was in his usual spirits at lunch that day ? ”

“ He was in very good spirits.”

“ You neither saw nor heard anything, then, that would lead you to think he might be meditating such a step as——”

“ Nothing at all.”

“ And this is all you can tell us ? ”

“ Yes.”

The coroner now looked distinctly ruffled, and there was another silence.

“ Very well,” he said at last. “ You will see,” turning to the jury, “ that there are some rather unusual features in the case. Adjourned until this day week.” He murmured some additional technicalities which only those nearest could catch, and the nightmare was over.

John sprang at once to his feet and would have gone to

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the girl's side, but his arm was seized by Ernest, and before he could free himself every sign of Miss Brown was gone. The Inspector appeared at his other side in like magical fashion and whispered hastily: "Go, Mr. Franklin, into that little room across the passage and wait there for me. You go too, Dr. Cathcart. I'll join you in a few minutes."

"If you want my car, Turner," Arthur exclaimed at once, "it's outside. I'll come with you," and they rushed off together.

"Come, John," Ernest said. "I've something to tell you."

"As long as you don't expect any sense from me," John answered wearily. "I don't know what I said in court just now. If I've committed perjury Turner must get me off on the plea of temporary insanity."

They had reached a little room, drearier even than the first, a small badly-lighted place where John could imagine prisoners might be kept before their appearance in court.

"Come in and shut the door," Ernest said eagerly. "See this," and with fingers that trembled he took from his pocket a tiny package loosely wrapped about in stained paper. Then unfolding it showed a little leather case and pressed the spring.

"Muriel's ring!" John exclaimed, "the parcel I spoke of! Ernest, how have you done it? This is wonderful. Turner said you couldn't find a trace of it. How did you get it back?"

"I couldn't hear a word of it yesterday—not a word, though I was hours down by the waterside and in and out of all the police stations and newspaper offices in Chelsea, making enquiries everywhere. But it was all no good, and I felt hopeless about it last night. Hardly anyone would even listen to me. But I had got a lot of advertisements out,

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describing the circumstances—making it out an accident, of course, that it was thrown away; and one of them was answered this morning.”

“Go on; tell me how and by whom.”

“It seems that when she threw it, it fell just within reach of a boat in which were two schoolboys——”

“Ah!”

“One of them put out his hand and picked up the parcel casually. Then, finding it contained a valuable ring he took it home with him and showed it to his father, who is a Chelsea clergyman. The father looked at the advertisements in the local paper this morning and saw mine. He ’phoned to me at once, and I went round then and there to see him. I could describe the ring exactly and all the circumstances, and he took special notice of it and can swear to it and to the facts about its being picked up. I ventured on my own account to give him a written receipt for it, besides a tip for the boy.”

“You’ve been splendid!” John cried. “Turner will rejoice at this. And poor Muriel, too; she’s been so wretched to think of that act of hers. You must take it to her, take it yourself! Go down to Bechenham to-morrow; it’ll cheer the poor child to see you—and the sight of the ring will do her more good than anything else.”

“Mr. Turner won’t object?” Ernest said. John’s praise had made his eyes light up with pleasure.

“I’m sure he won’t. You don’t know that fellow yet; but he’s got quite a high opinion of you, I can assure you. We were talking of you only this morning. But, Ernest, tell me—*do* tell me. . . . Do you really believe that this horrible business may have been what you said . . . a practical joke of poor Harold’s?”

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Ernest knit his brows and took a turn across the room. "I don't know that we can ever prove it," he said at last. "But if the final verdict is 'Misadventure' there will always be this possibility for your consolation. It seemed—seems to me it may have been so. What do you yourself think?"

"I'm so muddled, I don't know what to think," John confessed. "I've been spending the whole morning turning over his papers and accounts. And when I was there I got the impression that he was in financial difficulties and committed suicide in a sudden fit of despair. But now . . . I don't know. Your theory does seem so much more like Harold. . . . If it were not for——"

"Well?"

"If it weren't for one or two things that puzzled us in his papers. . . . In fact I was going to ask you whether you could explain something." He remembered suddenly the statement of accounts drawn up by the Inspector. This seemed a favourable moment in which to approach Ernest. He fumbled in his pocket-book: "Can you help us to solve this?" Ernest took the sheet of paper and moved to the begrimed window of the dusty little room. Then, starting as if he had been stung, he turned and flung it down. "Solve it!" he cried out angrily, "Why do you ask me? You know what I think—what I've always thought! What is there to solve? You heard the girl in court just now; you know how she lied. Who is she? You heard her hesitate over her own name. What *is* her name? Why don't you find that out and then see if there's any mystery at all left to solve?"

In dismay John picked up the paper, not the Inspector's neat statement, but the note he had unconsciously pocketed,

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the note in Harold's handwriting which began: "Beauteous Cleopatra——"

At this very moment, to his relief, Arthur Bertram burst into the room, followed by the Inspector, and at once the story of the ring had to be re-told and Ernest called upon to produce it.

"Dr. Cathcart, you've done well; you've done very well; you've beaten us all," the Inspector said warmly. "This is the best piece of news you could have given me. It's a miracle. I don't know when I've heard of anything smarter."

"No, nor I, by Jove," Arthur Bertram agreed. "I never thought there was the ghost of a chance. I must confess this find is a great relief to *my* mind. No question now as to what might have been in the little parcel Harold handed to Muriel! And upon my soul, with that other girl standing up as she did to-day and carrying on in that fashion—why, she'd upset the Old Bailey itself! But what on earth is she after? What's her stunt? What was the sense of all that about her *portrait* and poor old Harold being a complete stranger to her? Why, he introduced her to you, didn't he, Uncle John? What's her idea in pretending that she never had anything to do with him?"

John shook his head in perplexity. "I don't know; I haven't a guess why she should talk like that."

"And it was a lie about her address, too. The Inspector has just 'phoned to the Albion, and they say there's no such name on their books—she hasn't been near the place! There's something got to be cleared up about that girl, and the sooner it's done the better."

Another diversion was here made by the entrance of poor Williams, who was asking for Mr. Turner, and was ushered

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in, looking bewildered and forlorn, by an attendant of the court. The Inspector went to greet him, and as he did so he slightly pushed John towards the door, whispering: "Go home now, sir. I'll call round early to-morrow morning." And John, thankful for the chance, slipped through the opening and then fled for the street. In a moment he was in a taxi, and a moment later was alighting at his own gate; and even before he had paid the man, was being ushered into his home by Mrs. Smith.

She gave him one quick look, and in that look John saw the weariness that must be in his own face.

"You'd like to have a bath, sir, before dinner," she said. "Then perhaps you'll lie down on your bed for an hour or so and I'll bring it up to you."

"Oh, I don't want to go to bed. I can't have dinner in bed," John exclaimed hastily.

"No, sir, but if you'll just lie down after your bath——"

"Well, well, I'll see," John said, yawning already, and he dragged himself to the bathroom and then to his bed in a dazed numbness such as he had never in his life felt before.

Lying there aching with brain-fag he turned heavily on his side and waited for Mrs. Smith's appearance. Perhaps he might just as well . . .

But when at last she came and began quietly to arrange a tray on a small table by his bed, the room was full of sunlight, and the meal she brought him was his breakfast.

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CHAPTER VIII

NO. 14 LABURNAM VILLAS

"AND now, sir," Mrs. Smith said, when the breakfast was eaten and all the questions about Muriel and herself had been asked and answered, "Inspector Turner is here waiting to see you ; and he's rather pressed for time."

"Send him up," John said, reaching for his pipe, and as he lighted it the Inspector, looking apologetic, was shown in.

"Now, Turner," John began at once, "it's not one scrap of use beginning to talk to me about yesterday and that horrible business. If I committed perjury I'm willing to suffer for it. I can only plead that I didn't know what I was saying ! "

"Oh, that was nothing, sir. The whole thing was informal, and it went off much as I expected. At least——"

"You mean that girl ? Turner, I can't get rid of the thought of her. Her face haunts me. What *do* you make of her ? "

"I don't know what to make of her," the inspector confessed.

"Of course, all that about her sitting to me for her portrait, and Harold coming in as an afterthought, was invention. But why should she do it ? Why should she try to dissociate herself so absolutely from him now ? If she cared for him . . . or he for her . . ." He paused.

"She hadn't any reason for *disliking* him, had she?"

"I don't know. She never showed a sign of feeling for him one way or the other that I noticed. Is it true that she gave a false address, as Arthur says?"

"I'm not quite sure about that, yet."

"But didn't they deny knowing her name at the Albion?"

"There is certainly no one staying there under that name who could be identified as her."

"And there has not been?"

"No one."

"Do you think she may have given a false name?"

"I don't quite know what to think. She is not staying at the hotel now, at any rate."

"But about her name. Is it really Brown?"

"It may have been. It may not still be Brown."

John turned sharply and looked at him. "Oh, Turner, don't!" he entreated; "don't say it. It's what Ernest thinks, I know; but I can't believe it."

"It's a point that can easily be settled," the Inspector said. "But I'm puzzled about her for other reasons. She has been trying to leave the country, I find, trying to get across to France."

"What on earth can that mean?"

"I don't know. I wish I did."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm not quite sure," the Inspector said with a furtive look at John. "For the moment we've stopped her, but of course she has a right to go. She happened to speak to one of our men about it yesterday afternoon, and he said he would ask me and let her know whether it would be in order for her

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to leave the country before the adjourned inquest. Fortunately she accepted that."

"Her manner is so strange," John said uneasily; "of course, she has been on the films and that might account for some of it."

"It might."

"And yet I don't believe she is acting. She looks so really ill and wretched. Though I daresay that young nephew of mine would jeer at me for saying so. I suppose he did jeer after I went away yesterday?"

"Oh, Mr. Bertram could put us all right," the Inspector said, smiling; "he jeers at me too, of course."

"He's an impertinent young fellow; but I don't suppose you mind?"

"Not a bit for myself, sir. It's good for us, I expect. But I'm worried when he gets talking for fear these reporters should catch hold of what he says. There won't be much in the papers about this inquest; but if he talks rashly now as he was doing yesterday there will be a whole case worked up and ready by next Thursday. We've got to go at things in earnest now. And I shan't be able to do much to-day. I have to go out of town for the best part of it, on special business. I'm more vexed about it than I can tell you; but it can't be helped."

"To go at things in earnest?" John repeated.

"Why, sir, I know how hard you worked yesterday—I wasn't meaning that. But there's more to do still, a lot more."

"You don't think that theory of Dr. Cathcart's will be accepted, then?"

"I think it may. I won't discuss it now, sir, because

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I haven't the time. But we've got to be prepared for the fact that it may not."

"Oh, I hate the whole miserable business!" John cried wearily.

"Come, sir, you mustn't lose heart. It may all be for no purpose; but you know I always do work in this way. I want the facts before I can start on any theories. I've known cases that looked full of complications to fall to pieces in a minute like a castle of cards, and all because of some trifle that didn't seem worth noticing at the time. A mislaid letter or a key or an old photograph—any little thing like that. We didn't go through half those papers yesterday; there may be something amongst them that'll clear up the whole mystery."

"Yes," John agreed, sighing. "But I hoped Ernest's theory covered everything."

"I daresay it does. All the same, we've got to make sure there was no strong reason for suicide."

"I haven't told you yet of a horrible blunder I made with regard to that note we found," John said, and related the story of the substituted paper which he had shown to Dr. Cathcart.

The Inspector heard it without a smile and with a thoughtful face.

"So Dr. Cathcart still adheres to that idea?" he said slowly, and he was silent again.

"Mr. Franklin," he said at last, "I want you to do something for me to-day—something that I know you'll hate; but all the same I especially want you to do it."

"Well?" John said apprehensively.

"I want you," the Inspector said, taking out his pocket-

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book and extracting a piece of paper, "to go to this address at Laburnum Villas—the one that Miss Brown first gave us."

"But is she there?"

"No; but she was there for several weeks previous to last Tuesday. And I want you to see the people of the house—get them to talk to you in a friendly way—let them see you come as a friend. I hear they are really nice people, and of course they could tell us a lot if they chose. The daughter, Evelyn Paxton, was acting for the films with Miss Brown lately; she must know all about her. But it would be useless to send one of our men. If once people get an idea that they may be mixed up with a law-case, they're never spontaneous. They'll either spin a yarn to please you, or else shut their mouths and not say a word."

"Turner, I couldn't do it. You know I couldn't. I should fail miserably. I couldn't go as a spy on that poor girl."

"I don't want you to go as a spy, sir," Mr. Turner declared. "I've said I want you to go as a friend. Don't think of it as underhand work, or be ashamed of it. You may be doing the kindest thing possible by Miss Brown. You may discover just the one little fact on which all the big things turn."

"Big things; small things," John sighed, remembering his dreams. "I begin to think there isn't much difference."

"Not in their results, sometimes, sir."

"I don't know how I can face this job. I hate the thought of it."

Mr. Turner looked as unhappy as John himself. "It means the waste of a whole day, sir, if you don't. There's no one else I can trust for just what I want you to do."

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"When will you be back again?"

"I hope I shall be able to come in and see you this evening about 8 o'clock."

"Well . . ." John said at last. Leave the address and get out. I made a mess of everything I touched yesterday, and I shall make a worse one to-day. However . . . I'd better get up, I suppose . . . and you'd better be off before I change my mind."

The Inspector gave him a card. "Telephone to me here in the middle of the day," he said, and was gone.

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It was with a lagging step that John set out, an hour later, for Nile Street, Battersea; and what courage he had was at its lowest as he stood on the doorstep of No. 14 Laburnum Villas. It was a dreary little street, lined on each side by drab and dreary houses all exactly alike, and all presenting to the passer-by the same bleak unwelcoming look.

"What a place!" John thought; "worse in some ways than a really poor district. How can people keep alive and human here?" Through the Nottingham-lace curtains of one or two of the windows opposite he could see inquisitive eyes peeping.

The door was opened rather sharply by a young-looking woman, probably in the early forties, and of far more personality than he expected. At any other time her face and manner would have at once attracted him; but at this moment she looked both worried and wearied.

"Yes, I'm Mrs. Paxton," she said, almost before John had got out the enquiry. "No, Miss Brown is *not* living

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here. And I don't know where she is, and I can't give you her address ; and I haven't any idea where she has gone, and can't supply you with any information whatever. Not a word."

"Oh," John said, taken aback. "Oh . . . I'm so sorry to trouble you. I had an idea——"

"And what's more," Mrs. Paxton added, drawing back a little as she, too, noticed the heads collecting behind the Nottingham-lace curtains opposite, "what's more, if you have come from the Press or the police or anything of that sort, I must ask you to be so good as to tell them what I say, and that it's no use calling here for information. My husband says this sort of thing has got to stop ; it's making the house the talk of the neighbourhood. Whatever it's all about I can't imagine. But it's no concern of ours. We have nothing to do with it. Nothing whatever. So perhaps you'll tell that to whoever may have asked you to come. And also that we shall be glad to be let alone and have no more enquiries about Miss Brown."

All the time she was speaking her shrewd and naturally kindly eyes were studying John's small neat figure with curiosity ; and in spite of her manner she was evidently impressed in his favour.

"I quite understand," he said sympathetically. "But I haven't come from the police or the Press. I'm an artist. I was painting a picture of Miss Brown, and I wondered what had become of her. She hasn't been to the studio for a day or two. I thought perhaps she was ill." And as he spoke he took out his card. "I owe Miss Brown some money, too."

"Oh," Mrs. Paxton said, and taking the card studied it carefully. "An artist. Well . . . I don't know." It

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was evident that her curiosity was deeply engaged. "Well . . . if you like to come in for a few minutes . . . but I really can't tell you any more than I've said," and with a defiant glance at the windows opposite she stepped back and allowed John to enter the narrow passage. The house was not only fresh and clean, but gay with bright colour, and the little room at the back, into which she now led him, was a good deal more to John's taste than he could have imagined possible.

"Sit down, Mr. Franklin," Mrs. Paxton said more cordially. She showed herself as she faced him now to be a grey-eyed dark-haired woman—possibly a Devonshire woman—with a charming simplicity of manner and a ready smile; "I've been so worried about all this business," she went on in apology for her first reception of him. "All these people calling and asking questions. And none of them believing my answers either. And then going away and sending someone else, I'm sure, to see if I'll say anything different! As if I'd nothing else to do but help them find this girl. It's quite true, on my honour, Mr. Franklin, that I don't know where she is. I daresay you could tell me more than I can tell you."

John, feeling that this was probably true, passed it over in silence, but he looked up with his characteristic and engaging smile. He was convinced his companion was speaking the truth, and he hated more than ever the task of prying and seeking to entrap her. But Mrs. Paxton had laid aside her distrust and spoke of her own accord.

"It's been a mysterious business, Mr. Franklin, and I only hope there's nothing worse behind it. But when people act in such extraordinary ways and won't give you a word of explanation . . . what *are* you to think?"

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"You feel that something extraordinary has happened?" John said.

"I simply don't know what to make of it all. I wish I did. You see, Mr. Franklin, it's like this . . ." She paused and looked full at him with her large, candid grey eyes.

"Mrs. Paxton," John said, "if you feel you can trust me I shall be more grateful than I can tell you. I don't come with any unfriendly feeling for Miss Brown; quite the reverse. If only I knew a little more I might be able to help her."

"Oh dear, Mr. Franklin, you frighten me," the woman said, turning pale. "I've always said there was something uncanny about that girl. What is it? What has happened? She was here on Wednesday morning asking for her letters and looking like nothing on earth. But she wouldn't tell me a thing. She looked desperate. Oh—she hasn't committed suicide, has she?"

"No, no; I saw her yesterday afternoon. But there is some trouble, and if it was only my own affair I would tell you all about it. But as things stand I can hardly do so just now."

"I'll tell you what I know," Mrs. Paxton said, moved by his tone. "She's had a couple of rooms in this house for the last two months, as I expect you know. She and my daughter, Evelyn, made friends when they were rehearsing together. I don't know if you care for pictures of that sort, Mr. Franklin?" she smiled demurely.

"Pictures?" John echoed. "Oh no; not that sort."

"Well, they were both appearing in a film called 'The Serpent Tempted Him.'"

"Miss Brown was in that, I know."

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"She was 'Lamia'; she made her name in the part, and my Evelyn was the other girl; they were a good contrast, because Evelyn's small and fair. I did see the piece, but I didn't think much of it; though Miss Brown looked very handsome in her part. You would admire her, Mr. Franklin, I expect, being an artist?"

"Yes, I thought her a beautiful girl."

"Yes, yes, she was. But strange-looking, don't you think? Well, that's how she seemed to me. I never felt I knew her a bit better after having her two months in the house than I did when I first saw her. She would sit staring with those great eyes of hers till it used to get on my nerves. And when people say so little you can't help wondering sometimes whether it isn't because they have something to be silent about. Not that I know anything against her; don't think that. I never saw a thing amiss all the time she was here, and Evelyn would say the same, I know."

"Your daughter and Miss Brown were friends?"

"They were when she came to us."

"Not so much, lately?"

"Well, I think Evelyn got rather annoyed with her. She said Miss Brown had grown so secret and never would tell her anything. She thought she had changed, and was different from what she had been at first. She had quite given up her acting, for one thing, and would never say why——"

"She had given it up?" John said, remembering the girl's words of yesterday—"I have no profession."

"Since that last film; just before she came here, I understood. That seemed strange, because it was her first real success; the first star part she ever had."

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"Had she private means? Did she seem well-off?"

"I can hardly tell you. She always paid me regularly; but her coming to live here," Mrs. Paxton smiled as though quite recognised the social status of Nile Street, "didn't look as though she was well-off. She had pretty clothes and she seemed to buy a good many more while she was with us. In fact, to be quite frank about it, we were all convinced she had a love affair and was going to be married. She used to lock up all her things in her two big trunks and never showed us a glimpse of them; but that's what we all thought."

"Did she have any callers? Did you ever see anyone who might be the future husband?"

"Never. And she never spoke of anyone. Evelyn says she was very much admired, and in the beginning she seems to have been just like any other girl, pleased about it and quite natural. She wasn't at all vain or conceited about her looks, I think."

"I thought that, too. But you were saying she had grown secret lately?"

"Yes. She gave up her acting and seemed anxious to keep away from all the old set entirely. Got into this silent way and wouldn't go anywhere with Evelyn if she thought she might meet any of the film people she had known. In fact, I never gave much thought to the matter at all. I told Evelyn I was sure she was going to be married, and that it was sheer nonsense and affectation making such a mystery about it. I felt certain it was some fine gentleman that she was engaged to and she didn't want us to know about it. 'Perhaps a duke, and she's practising aristocratic behaviour,' was what I said to Evelyn. And that's what I thought right up to Tuesday last."

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"And what happened then?" John asked as quietly as he could.

"Why, it was the most extraordinary business. I can't make it out at all. She had told me she would be leaving us on Tuesday and had packed up all her things and sent them away on the Monday night, though where she sent them I don't know. I didn't want to ask questions that she didn't want to answer! She used to be out a great deal, said she was having her picture painted and was at some studio most of the day. As to that, you'll know better than I do. Was it so, Mr. Franklin?"

"Quite true. She has been at my studio every day for the last two months."

"Well, Evelyn and I had stopped asking her anything, as I say. And Evelyn was inclined to be hurt with her. But I never cared a rap for her queer ways. I was glad she was going, for I was tired of her. So when she paid me I said straight out: 'I suppose we shall hear of your wedding now, Miss Brown? You've been very quiet about it, but it's what we all expect.' Something like that. I thought she'd very likely be angry with me; but I didn't care."

"And was she?"

"No. To my surprise she only smiled and blushed——"

"And admitted it?"

"Not quite; but she said, 'I've asked Evelyn and one or two other friends to dine with me at eight o'clock to-morrow night (that would be Tuesday night); and then I shall have a big surprise to announce to them.' I believe those were her very words, and she spoke quite like anyone else. Not that drawling one-word-at-a-time sort of fashion she generally used, if you know what I mean."

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"I know. Please go on."

"Well, when I asked my daughter, she told me it was so—that she and one or two of the old set, her old friends on the films, I mean, had been invited to dinner and Miss Brown told them she had a surprise for them. They were to meet her outside Albion Street Station at half-past seven and then they were to be informed where the dinner was to be. I said to Evelyn, 'Well, it's just as I told you. She's going to be married to-morrow and you'll meet the bridegroom at dinner.' I never expected anything else, and I told Evelyn to be prepared and to tell the others. And Evelyn bought her a bouquet and put on her smartest clothes, and all the others did the same. And they were all there waiting for her outside the station at the time agreed——"

"And then . . . ?" John said.

"And then, Mr. Franklin, the very strangest thing happened. They had been waiting there perhaps ten minutes, and then she came driving up in a big car with a very fine gentleman, just as they all expected—and she in a sweet new dress. . . . And if you'll believe it—she jumped out of the car and was crying and sobbing and shaking all over! And she dragged Evelyn aside and begged her to send the others away and said something terrible had happened and she couldn't explain it then; but only would they all go away at once and leave her. On and on like that. And the gentleman and the car had both disappeared; and by the time Evelyn had taken it all in and told the others, Miss Brown herself had disappeared too, and they had nothing to do but to turn round and go home again."

John was silent; but Mrs. Paxton evidently judged by his face that he found the events as inexplicable as she did.

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" I couldn't believe my ears when Evelyn came back and told us. We've discussed it ever since. It looks as though the bridegroom had never turned up. That wouldn't be anything very extraordinary ; I mean that sort of thing has happened a score of times to other people. But Evelyn didn't think from the girl's manner that that would account for everything. My husband thought perhaps it was one of those cases where a young man arranges to get married without letting his people know of it, and then they appear at the last minute and stop the proceedings."

John shook his head.

" No. I don't think it, either. I'm more inclined to the idea that it was bigamy or something like that. You can never tell with these actors and artists. They don't seem to think much of an extra wife or so. But Miss Brown knew the sort of people she had to deal with, she should have been on her guard. Not that she herself is that kind. I hope I haven't given you any false impression about her, Mr. Franklin. There's never been a word against her and I have never heard her name coupled with any man's. In fact, Evelyn is certain this sweetheart of hers was no one connected with the cinema ; she says she should have heard about it if he had been. But then we knew so little. The girl herself may have been married before ; perhaps fancied the husband dead, and then he may have turned up at the last minute. Evelyn tells me there was rather a strange sort of man who got introduced to her not so long ago, and she is sure he did it for no other purpose than to pump her about Miss Brown. Not at all friendly in his manner, either."

" Did she tell you his name ? "

" I don't think she knew it. But, oh dear, Mr. Franklin,

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you're looking quite pale. I'm afraid the girl was more to you than I thought."

"No, no!" John said, smiling at the idea that Mrs. Paxton was fancying him a wronged husband or jilted lover; "it's not that."

"Then I'm afraid there's something worse behind it all, as Evelyn's been thinking lately. All these reporters calling. All these questions about her whereabouts. Oh, I do hope it isn't a case where the bridegroom shoots himself on the wedding-day, or anything like that! My husband did tell us to look in the evening paper; but I didn't notice anything; and someone would have been sure to mention it if Miss Brown's name had appeared. Mr. Franklin, can't you tell me just enough to reassure us? If the poor girl is left stranded I will go to her and fetch her back here. There hasn't been any tragedy of that sort, has there?"

"I wish I could be frank with you, Mrs. Paxton," John said, miserably uncertain what to do. "I wish I could be as frank with you as you have been with me. But if I speak just now I may give you quite a false impression of things, may suggest ideas that have no foundation. As for Miss Brown herself, she is almost a stranger to me. I have always believed her to be just as you describe her—quite a nice girl in herself, but for some reason or other bent on making herself mysterious and incomprehensible."

"You're right, Mr. Franklin; and if she has got into difficulties I shall always say it was due to her silent, uncanny ways. If people choose to go about making mysteries of themselves they have only themselves to thank if mysterious things happen to them."

"Perhaps," John said, sighing. "But can you tell me

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any more? I shall be unspeakably grateful if you will. I should like to hear all I can now. Only I can't bear you to think I come to pump you, and tell you nothing in return. It has been extraordinarily good of you to treat me so openly, and it may be a most real help to everyone."

"Then there is some dreadful story behind it all?"

"A story; yes. I don't know, I hope not a dreadful one. And I don't even know for certain that Miss Brown was in any way concerned with it." Mrs. Paxton looked sceptical at this. "But when I've heard what you can tell me I'll go away and think it all over and then if you'll allow me I'll come again, perhaps to-morrow, and tell you the whole thing so far as I can."

"Why of course I will," Mrs. Paxton said; "though there isn't much more. But next morning a young man called about eight o'clock and asked me if Miss Brown lived here. He might have been a clerk of some sort; he had a legal-looking envelope in his hand. He stared very straight at me when I said she had left the house and I didn't know where she had gone. I could see the envelope was addressed to Miss Phyllis Brown: so that looks rather as if she hadn't been married after all, doesn't it? But she had told me she would call round on Wednesday morning in case there were any letters for her: and I told the young man so and asked him if he would care to leave it for her. But he said no, he wanted to deliver it into her own hands. I felt rather concerned at that; for I was afraid it might be a summons of some sort, and that made me suspect a case of bigamy."

"Yes."

"Well, I watched him and he must have waited an hour for her; because at about nine o'clock I saw Miss Brown

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herself coming along the street and as soon as she got to our doorstep, this man went up to her and gave her the envelope and said something to her. Asked her, I should guess, to read it then and there ; for she tore it open at once, and he watched her all the time and pointed to something on the paper. It wasn't a letter, I think, but some kind of printed notice. And she seemed to say ' Yes ' and nodded her head ; and then he raised his hat and walked away."

John, who knew well that this must have been the notice to attend the inquest, only said : " And did she come in ? Did you speak to her ? "

" She rang the bell and I rushed to the door, for I was longing to know what it all meant, as you may guess. And I was just beginning, ' Well, Phyllis, you *did* give them all a surprise last night ! ' or something like that—But I couldn't, Mr. Franklin—I couldn't get the words out. I hadn't the heart to speak when I saw her . . . the poor child looked so unhappy—I should hardly have known her. I begged her to come in and have something or have a rest ; but she would only say, ' No, no. Don't ask me . . . don't ask me any questions. Only let me have my letters, if there are any ! ' Just like that. I can't tell you how she made me feel ! Well, there weren't any letters and she said she must go at once ; though I felt I couldn't part with her, and I asked her if we couldn't help her at all, and where she was going, or where we should send letters to her. But she put her hands to her head as if she couldn't think what to do, and would only say, ' No, no ' to everything. And finally she turned and went off just like that, and we haven't heard one word of her since. I can't help being anxious about her ; it all seems so strange. Did you say you saw her yesterday, Mr. Franklin ? "

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"I saw her, yes. And she looked just as you describe . . . ill, and very unhappy. But I'll find out all about her and come back and tell you, Mrs. Paxton; if you can trust me a little longer."

"I'm sure I can trust you. I'm glad to think the girl has such a good friend."

"Oh, as to that——" said poor John, heavily. "But I know I'm taking up your time, and I must be going on. My address is on my card; and if you *should* hear any more before I come back——"

"I'll write to you, or Evelyn shall run round and see you. She could tell you more than I can, probably. I wish the girl would come back to us. Whatever's happened we would stand by her! Mr. Franklin, will you tell her that, if you get the chance?"

"I will," John said, but a shudder passed through him at the words "Whatever's happened."

Mrs. Paxton was studying his card. "I saw the sudden death of a Chelsea artist in the paper last night; he must have lived somewhere near you, I think. My husband and I were wondering if it could be the one that was painting Miss Brown, and whether he had a seizure of some sort while she was there and that was the cause of her being so upset. Or even," she looked questioningly at John, "even whether he might be the gentleman she was going to marry? But you say it was yourself who was painting her?"

"Yes, yes," John said, anxiously, before she guessed more. "I'll come and see you again quite soon, Mrs. Paxton. I don't suppose it's any use trying to put off these newspaper people who ask questions——"

"Oh, I *can* hold my tongue; I don't always

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chatter as I have done to you!" Mrs. Paxton assured him.

"And I am honoured by your trust. I can't thank you enough!" John said, and the two shook hands, each thinking well of the other, and each aware of and indifferent to the crowding faces at the windows opposite. "They've had a long wait," John reflected grimly.

He walked away slowly and wearily, feeling as though he had been pelted with facts of which his brain could make no sense. "I wonder what Turner will say to all this," was his recurring thought. He could not bring himself, as yet, to the task of piecing together the story and trying to make it fit with what he already knew. "No, no; I won't begin. Turner's right, we can't draw conclusions until we know all the facts."

He went to the nearest telephone office and called up Mrs. Smith to ask if Mr. Bertram or Dr. Cathcart had called, and in reply was told they had been there together a quarter of an hour ago, leaving a message for him to say that Mr. Bertram had driven over in his car and was taking Dr. Cathcart back to Beckenham with him. ("So Muriel will get her ring," John thought.) Mrs. Smith sounded somewhat agitated and he learnt that, like Mrs. Paxton, she had been answering reporters at intervals all morning . . . there had been "such a number" of them. "That settles it," John decided, "I won't go home just now," and he hailed a taxi and directed the man to drive him to an Arts club of which he was a member.

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Harold Nelson had been a member of the same club.

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Of course his death would be known to everyone by this time. Obituary notices, with eulogies on his pictures, were already appearing in the papers, though so far the word "suicide" had not been mentioned. But what was being said by his friends? By John's own friends?

He was not left long in doubt. Before he had made three steps from the door a fellow-artist accosted him. "Franklin, I say, what awful news this is about poor old Nelson! What was it? How did it happen?"

"It's a most terrible tragedy," John said, finding it even harder to speak than he had imagined.

"But what was it? Heart? A fit? The paper only says 'sudden death.' They say it happened in your studio. How ghastly for you!"

"Yes," John said. "The doctors haven't given their final decision yet——" He spoke with such obvious trouble that the other, perhaps suddenly remembering John's intimate connection with the dead man, stopped short, and let him escape.

He slipped into one of the rooms, and dropping into a large chair, hid himself behind a paper, searching for accounts of the inquest. Other men were there and were talking on the same topic. The club was ringing with it.

"I say, have you heard this about Harold Nelson? Isn't it awful? What do the papers say? What was it?"

"They don't give the cause. But I hear it was suicide."

"Suicide? Old Nelson? Impossible!"

"Jack Raynor says it was a fit——"

"Much more likely!"

"No, I had it from Dynover, who had it from Nelson's batman—it was suicide sure enough."

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"Gad! What on earth for?"

"I heard he'd been stabbed by one of his models," broke in a new voice. "Jealousy, that sort of thing."

"It wasn't a model, it was an actress and Nelson was painting her. He was mad about her."

"I don't believe it. Why, he was engaged to John Franklin's daughter and just going to be married."

"Well, that was the reason, probably. This other woman found that out and went for him."

"That's not true. It was suicide. He was in love with this actress and they were going to make a bolt of it together, when old Franklin blew in and discovered the whole plot, and Nelson took poison and fell down dead on the spot!"

"That's true enough. Tony Lutterell was reporting at the inquest and he says this woman turned up and made no end of a scene. The whole place was in an uproar, and the coroner shouting for silence, and old Franklin sitting there sobbing like a child——"

"You've never had your leg pulled, have you, old man? It wasn't Franklin who was sobbing; it was that poor old fellow, Nelson's batman."

"Well, this woman was there, anyway: and she isn't an actress, she's a cinema star, Daisy Jones or some such name. And Lutterell believes she did for poor Nelson herself. She was just that sort—a regular screen vamp—and the coroner couldn't get a word out of her."

"Well, you can be certain the whole thing is lies from beginning to end. There's not a word about it in the reports of the inquest."

"No; and it wasn't about a woman at all," called out yet another voice. "It was money. Nelson had lost

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thousands in racing. He was a ruined man and didn't dare face his creditors. I know that for a fact. Pengelly saw him only last week coming away from that fellow's place in Regent Street—you know, MacDonald, the bookie, next to the jeweller's ; and he says Nelson looked like nothing on earth. He was sure he had about ruined himself."

"All the same——" The voices went on and on, each new one having something to add. But John had heard enough, and as unnoticeably as he could he slipped out of the room again.

The papers, on the whole, had been discreet in their reports of the inquest. There was a hint here and there that a terrible misadventure was suspected, but comment was guarded—in the morning papers, at least. He breathed more freely. There was still time ; still hope.

He ate a hasty luncheon and managed with fair success to escape questions. One or two of the older men expressed their sympathy ; some looked at him curiously, but respected his wish to be left alone. He heard Harold's friends whispering about the tragedy. They whispered now. What would they do next Friday when the real inquest was reported ?

The last remarks he had heard recalled the impressions he and Mr. Turner had formed in their study of Harold's papers. He went to the telephone-box and rang up the Inspector. It was impossible to give a full account of his talk with Mrs. Paxton, but he promised this later, and repeated carefully the name and address of the bookmaker mentioned in the club gossip. This done, he left the place and walked home, turning the facts over in his mind. Had Harold actually been embarrassed financially, and afraid to meet his liabilities ? Was there, after all, someone who corresponded

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to the initials "G. M." who had a hold on him? And had he tried by plunging into horse-racing and gambling to raise a sum of money which should free him once for all of the incubus? And failing—finding himself more deeply involved than ever, finding himself perhaps hopelessly tied. . . .

So walking, lost in thought, John drew near to his house; but just as he reached the gate he was made aware that someone was trying to stop him, to attract his attention; and he drew up with a start to find himself looking up into a pale face and dark, troubled eyes—the last face of all others he expected to see at that moment.

"Miss Brown!" he exclaimed in amazement.

CHAPTER IX

CONFESSION

FOR one distracted moment John wondered if he could merely clutch at his hat and escape to the house ; but it was not to be.

" I was waiting for you . . . hoping to see you, Mr. Franklin," she said, in a timid voice. " Could you spare me a few minutes ? "

Her face was so forlorn, so wretched, that John's heart was touched, and though he felt some natural shrinking he spoke with all his characteristic kindness :

" Why, yes, Miss Brown, if you wish. Will you come into the house ? "

" If I may. But can I . . . can you . . . can I see you alone ? "

" Oh yes, of course. I'm quite alone as it happens. Only Mrs. Smith and myself here."

He led the way and she followed him, drawing back as he opened the door, to avoid notice or from unwillingness to cross that threshold. John was relieved that for once Mrs. Smith did not come out to greet him.

" Come upstairs, to my little sitting-room," he said ; " we shan't be interrupted there," and he took her upstairs. " Now sit down and tell me what I can do for you."

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She did not sit down, however, but stood by the mantelpiece, pushing back with one hand the heavy black hat, the one she had worn at the inquest.

"Do take that off," John said, for he was unused to see her in her out-door clothes. "I'm sure you'll be more comfortable without it. Let me take that cloak, too."

She absently lifted off the hat and gave him the cloak showing now the dead pallor of her face and her heavy, weary eyes.

"But you're tired—you're ill!" John cried in dismay. He would hardly have known her, could hardly believe this was the beautiful face he had seen only three days ago smiling up at him over the violets. "Have you been waiting long for me?"

"I don't know; I didn't notice," she said indifferently. "But it doesn't matter at all. I wanted to see you. I wanted to ask you if you could help me."

John looked at her in perplexity. Was this the mysterious, silent Miss Brown? She seemed an utterly different creature; and for some reason his heart reproached him. "Sit down: do sit down," he said; "if I can help you, be sure I will."

"I don't know how to begin," she said, slipping into the long easy chair he pushed forward, her whole body trembling and shrinking.

"Tell me just what you like," John said. "I—I'm afraid you're very unhappy. Perhaps it would help you to talk." But he was dreading to hear what she might have to tell.

"Yes," she said, but still hesitated. "I wanted. . . . First of all I wanted. . . . I mean. . . . I came to explain

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about yesterday. You must have thought it so strange . . . some of the things I said. . . . And about Tuesday, too. I wanted to tell you I was sorry I spoke to you as I did that evening. But I was so upset . . . everything was so dreadful ! ”

“ Why, of course I understood. I understood all that, Miss Brown ! ” John said, taken aback at this opening.

“ Mr. Franklin,” she said, her eyes on the flames of the little fire, “ I ought to tell you I’m not ‘ Miss Brown ’ any more. I was married on Tuesday—the very day that——” a sob choked her and she broke off.

“ Married ! ” John repeated. Though he had been half-prepared for this he felt it as an utterly unexpected blow. His thoughts flew to Muriel, to Ernest, to himself, then back to the girl beside him. He could make no other answer to her, could not speak again, but sat with eyes on the floor, his heart burning within him.

“ I ought to have told you,” she said with another sob, “ but it was for his sake . . . my husband’s . . . ”

“ He wished you to keep it a secret ? ” John murmured. Every word was pain to him and it amazed him that she should have chosen himself for a confidant. But her whole manner was strange. She seemed to have none of the shame that might have been expected, no consciousness at all of having betrayed a friendship that had given her her place in the household. Wretched as she undoubtedly was, it was apparently left for John to feel shame.

“ Not that so much,” she said ; “ but because of his position . . . his work.” John looked at her suddenly, breathlessly.

“ I was forgetting,” she went on in the same weary tones ;

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"I haven't told you his name. It is Carruthers . . . Hubert Carruthers——"

"Your husband's name is Carruthers?" John repeated stupidly—and drew his chair nearer to her.

"Yes . . . you don't know him, do you?"

"No; but tell me about him. Have you ever spoken of him to us?"

"No, no; I wish I had," she cried, tears coming fast and streaming down her face.

"But, my dear, why should you be so distressed? If you wanted to keep your engagement and marriage a secret why shouldn't you do so? Why should you tell us?"

"Oh, because it's all turned out so *dreadful*!" she sobbed, and the childish simplicity of her words and manner struck John with dismay.

"My dear," he said again, "you mustn't give way like this. Let me get you something . . . a glass of wine, some tea. *Do* let me, and then you shall tell me all about it."

"No, no—let me tell you now. I couldn't eat!" she said. "I'll be quiet. I won't cry," and she struggled for control.

"You were telling me the marriage was a secret . . ."

John said gently, thinking it best to follow her wishes.

"Yes; because, because of his position—because he's a cashier in the Bank of England."

"But aren't cashiers in the Bank of England allowed to get married?" John asked, completely at sea.

"Oh yes; I didn't mean that. It was because of my being a film actress. You see, I had just been doing 'Lamia,' and my picture was everywhere. It was the publicity. They hate publicity in the Bank of England."

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"Is that so?" said John, who had hitherto thought of the Bank of England impersonally, as a large stone building in Threadneedle Street, or as a little old lady pictured in the pages of *Punch*. "I didn't know that feeling existed anywhere nowadays."

"It exists there very strongly, I think. Mr. Carruthers says other people may call it old-fashioned but he glories in the fact. They have very strong feelings about everything English there. He told me that in some ways he feels the Bank is more representative of England than even the House of Lords."

"They feel that, do they?"

"Mr. Carruthers and his friends do, I know. He has been in the Bank since he was eighteen; and there's a regular set of them who all meet every day and have lunch together and discuss things. And of course they know each other very well, and all about each other and what each thinks about everything."

"But they're quite unanimous in their opinions of England and the Bank?"

"Oh yes. Hubert says he doesn't believe there's a more solid unity of feeling about England to be found anywhere."

"But tell me a little more about yourself. How did all this solid opinion affect you?"

"It was because of that," she said with a sigh. "Mr. Carruthers has always had such a strong feeling against the cinema. He thinks it was introduced by America and has brought in a thoroughly un-English spirit. Even when it isn't actually bad in itself he thinks it encourages a morbid taste for excitement and unreal sentiment. And he dislikes the people who act for the films, too, and all the photographs

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and paragraphs about them in the papers. And you see he had talked out the subject very often with his friends and expressed his opinions so strongly. He refused to enter a cinema and would never read accounts of film stars and their . . . their doings. And so, when he got engaged to me . . . he thought if we told everyone . . . my picture was sure to be in all the papers, and perhaps his own as well. And then, of course, his friends would see it and laugh at him ; because the film had been called ' The Serpent Tempted Him '——"

" I see," John said once more, and this time he really did see. " *That* was why it was all to be kept a secret ! "

" Yes ; and he asked me to give up film-work, and to break with all that life and its associations."

" He disliked it as much as that ? "

" He disliked everything about it. I don't think he would have minded so much if I had been on the legitimate stage—I mean, a regular actress at a theatre. He says they do at least sometimes study good literature and correct enunciation. But he does so hate the language of the film-captions—that sort of American-English. He thinks it has contributed to the ruin of intelligent speech."

" He is interested in the correct pronunciation of English, then, as well as everything else that's English ? "

" Yes, very much interested. He thinks we ought all to be taught to express ourselves in good plain speech just as we are taught to read and write ; and that there should be a certain standard below which no decently-educated person should fall."

" And you took all this very much to heart," John said, watching her curiously.

" Well, of course, when he put it all so plainly I could see

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what he meant ; and his way of talking was very different from what one hears among the people on the mov—I mean films. Their talk isn't conversation exactly ; not opinion and discussions at all ; but just a kind of slang and chaff. I mean they don't try to express themselves carefully even though some of them are quite well educated. Hubert says it's just laziness and a want of a sense of style."

"And you yourself ? " John persisted.

"It made me think about the way I talked, of course. I had never studied elocution much for the films. It is mostly gestures and facial expression that is wanted. I was always studying those."

"Well, Mr. Carruthers found no fault there, I'm sure."

"N-no," she said, not very certainly.

"Come, Mrs. Carruthers, you won't persuade me that any man or even the Bank of England itself can find faults where they don't exist. I'm sure your husband knows he has a most graceful and beautiful wife."

"I suppose he thinks so," she said slowly, taking this tribute to her looks in a singularly impersonal way ; "but I don't think men like anything conspicuous . . . anything unusual. I often wish I wasn't so foreign-looking : it makes people stare at me in the streets, even though I never make up my face. And Hubert hates that ; he thinks no woman need attract attention unless she wants it." And she sighed.

John was silenced again.

"And perhaps being on the films gets one into habits that seem noticeable. I wasn't at all good at acting. I was only chosen for my face and figure, and I had to rehearse for hours and hours before I could get the right effects. That serpent-glide in 'Lamia'—I thought I should *never* do it.

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. . . I used to ache all over from trying it . . . And perhaps I got other habits . . . one does, you know, if one acts a thing over and over again for hours at a time. But after I realised how much Hubert disliked it I tried very hard to break myself of them."

"In fact," John said gently, "you were always trying to unmake what you thought the films had made you; and to be something quite different?"

"Yes; that was exactly how it was. Mr. Carruthers thinks the genuine Englishwoman is the best-bred and finest type of woman in the world; but he says they won't realise it and *will* be always aping the worst points in foreigners. And I wanted to be what he admired, tried to get the—the manner. . . . I often used to wish——"

"Wish . . .?"

"I often wished I were like Miss Franklin. She always seems to know how to say and do the right thing."

"Oh, my dear, don't talk like that!" John exclaimed; "there are different types, you know. But was Mr. Carruthers appreciative of your efforts to change yourself?"

"I think *he* was. But I'm not sure that other people . . ."

"Other people preferred you as you were before?"

"I don't know. I think the people I have been living with lately laughed at me. It's so difficult to change one's way of talking. While one is thinking how to express a thing in good English and pronounce the words properly . . . the time has gone, or the thing doesn't seem worth saying at all."

It would have been easy enough for John to answer: "Then drop it all and be natural: you're a thousand times

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more attractive when you're natural!" but he saw plainly that any such suggestion would be scouted by the bride of Mr. Carruthers; so he said instead, in his kindest tones: "I know what you mean; but it's the same with everything one tries to learn seriously; at first the rules seem only to paralyse one, and one can't do anything for thinking of them. But you'll get over that stage; you'll find you'll be talking quite simply and well very soon, and Mr. Carruthers will be charmed with you. You've got such a pretty voice, too—I feel inclined to scold you for not letting me hear more of it before this! And you're very young, aren't you? Are you older than Muriel?"

"Oh yes, I was twenty-one last week. We . . . we waited for that." She brightened at his compliment to her voice, as she had not done when he spoke of her beauty, and John found himself marvelling at his own past dullness of perception. He had been used to laugh at this girl and despise her for affectation, and yet how harmless, and, paradoxically, how simple a thing this affectation now seemed. Beneath it was a naïveté and sweetness which touched his heart.

"The people you lived with . . . ?" he said.

"They were friends of mine; the Paxtons. The daughter Evelyn, acted with me in 'The Serpent Tempted Him.'"

"I have heard of that film. So you played the part of the temptress? By the way, did Mr. Carruthers ever see it?"

"Yes; but I'm sorry to say he didn't like it at all. He disliked it very much indeed."

John, remembering the photographs in Harold's room, of the lithe and lovely figure clad only in a skin of shining scales, was hardly surprised to hear this. "I didn't realise

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at the time that it was objectionable," she went on timidly. "Though, of course, I can see now. But one hasn't any choice, you know ; one is only glad to be chosen. And actors and artists have different ideas about such things, I think. Mr. Nelson admired my photographs in the part, and when I said some people disapproved of them, he said that was all middle-class rot. But Mr. Carruthers told me Mr. Nelson might feel very differently if they had been photographs of his own wife. And he asked me for his sake never to act for the screen again, after he saw me in 'The Serpent Tempted Him.' "

"You agreed to that ? "

"Yes, I gave up my contracts and we arranged to be married as soon as I was twenty-one. I took two rooms in Mrs. Paxton's house because they are such nice people, and though Evelyn acts for the films they don't care to have a lot of cinema people there. So I felt sure I should be out of the way ; and Evelyn promised not to tell anyone I was with them. I didn't want to be snap-shotted and have my picture in the papers, and Hubert's name dragged in. Once I was married they would forget all about me, if I never acted again."

"But something happened ? You found it not so easy as you expected to keep hidden away ? "

"Not that, exactly," she said, her voice faltering and tears rising once more. "I . . . I hardly know how to tell you. . . . It was just then that I met—met Mr. Nelson. Oh, Mr. Franklin, I know you'll be shocked . . . you'll think I acted in a horribly deceitful way. . . ."

"No I shall *not*," John said, sturdily. "I know you a great deal better than I did when you came into this room."

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Just tell me the whole story : I know you haven't done anything you need be ashamed of."

" Oh, but I have . . . I have," she cried.

" Well, tell me and let me judge."

" It was because I had given up my work . . . and I hadn't very much money then. I've been on my own ever since I was sixteen, and I've never been able to save much. . . . I never had a really good part until I did ' Lamia ' ; and sometimes I've had no work at all. I had enough to live on for those two months, but not much more. And I wanted to get a nice trousseau. I had never met Hubert's people. He is quite independent and he knew they would approve of anyone he chose, and he was going to take me to see them after we were married. He has a great many highly-connected relations."

" He would——" John was beginning, but hastily changed to, " Yes, go on. I don't see anything very wicked in wanting a pretty trousseau."

" No, but I had led him to think that giving up the work was nothing to me, that I could quite well afford it. I didn't like him to know that it put me in a difficulty."

" Even that appears to me excusable. Is that all you have to reproach yourself with ? "

" Oh no ; it's worse, much worse than that. But that was the beginning, my not having any money for my clothes. . . . And then I met Mr. Nelson . . . "

" I see," John said, his voice changing. " And he offered to lend you money ? " The whole story was becoming clear to him ; he had less difficulty now in believing that Harold might have fallen in love with this girl, while she herself was quite unconscious of the fact. But at his words she started.

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"Oh no," she exclaimed with horrified eyes. "I wouldn't have borrowed money of any man. Especially when I was engaged!"

"No—no, of course not, I was forgetting. Then what happened? How was poor Mr. Nelson connected with the money?"

"I met him three months ago at an Arts Ball in Chelsea, and someone introduced him to me, and . . . You remember how he used to carry on about anything that struck him? He wouldn't talk of anything that evening but my looks and how he would like to paint me. On and on, you know."

"Was Mr. Carruthers there, too?"

"Yes, he came with me. And he thought Mr. Nelson was rather bad style and very exaggerated in his way of talking. But Hubert isn't narrow-minded at all, and he always says you must recognise that the artistic temperament has laws and codes of its own. He thought Mr. Nelson might be an eccentric genius, and said he shouldn't attempt to judge him at first sight, as he might another man."

"Did he ever have a second sight of him?"

"Yes, Mr. Nelson asked us both to tea at his studio a day or two after. There were a lot of other people there; but he begged Hubert and me to stay after most of them had gone. He didn't know we were engaged; but I think perhaps he guessed. And we walked round and looked at his pictures, and it was very awkward because Mr. Carruthers didn't like them at all. He told me afterwards he thought them hideous. Even that portrait of Lord Wessex that the papers praised so much——"

"The Philanthropist?"

"Yes, that was what he called it. Hubert said to me

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privately that it was clever, of course, but he declined to call mere caricature good art. He considered it was in very doubtful taste. In fact he didn't like any of Mr. Nelson's work. And all the time Mr. Nelson kept begging me to let him paint me, and I didn't know what to say. And then he made a little sketch of how he would do me as Cleopatra, and I could see Mr. Carruthers didn't like that *at all*. At last I said I would think the matter over, and we agreed to let it rest there for the moment. And afterwards——”

“Afterwards ?”

“Mr. Carruthers was really annoyed about it all, and said he hoped nothing would induce me to let Mr. Nelson paint me, he didn't consider his pictures of women were fit to be hung on anyone's walls. He didn't actually forbid it, you know ; he said he wouldn't go as far as that, but he did hope most earnestly that I wouldn't agree to such a thing. But Mr. Nelson went on and on . . . and then he suggested I should make it a business arrangement, and offered me such liberal terms . . . But I refused because I didn't think Hubert would like me to go alone every day to his studio.”

“Ah,” John said. “This is where *I* come in !”

“Yes ; when he found out that was one of my reasons for refusing, Mr. Nelson said he would soon remove it, and then he made the proposal that I should come to your studio. He said he was certain you would like to paint me. He was always so funny and full of jokes, you know ; he used to say that under the skin I was a great deal more your type than his own. And, anyway, he declared no one could object to that arrangement, because you would be there to act as chaperon, and if I were Cleopatra her very self, I should do

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no harm nor get any in your household. And I wanted the money . . . and at last I agreed."

"But where, as Harold would say, was the harm in all this?"

"Because I never told Mr. Carruthers about the money, and I never told him about Mr. Nelson painting me at all. I just said I was going to sit to you for my portrait, and he was so pleased at that! He admires *your* painting, Mr. Franklin."

John smiled somewhat ambiguously.

"I see now how wrong it was of me," she went on, with a trembling lip, "but you were only doing the half-figure; it *looked* like a portrait, and I knew he would love it when he saw it. And as for Mr. Nelson's . . . I felt sure Hubert would never look at another picture of his; and if he did he would hardly have known it was meant for me."

"Poor Mr. Nelson!"

"Yes, yes. It's unkind of me to speak like that. I know how clever he was and what a wonderful colourist; only his things were so strange . . . so unlike real people. But he was always good to me, and paid me so well too. It's ungrateful of me to speak against him."

"You were able to get the pretty clothes, then?"

"Yes, I got all I wanted by degrees. And we made all our plans. We were to be married last Tuesday at half-past two at the registry office in Arch Street—not five minutes from here. Oh, it seems *years* ago! I can't believe it ever happened at all," and the tears fell again. "I ought to have told you, Mr. Franklin, but your picture was just finished. . . . I felt sure you wouldn't mind when I explained why it had all been a secret. And Mr. Nelson was so good-natured, he

would only have laughed about it. And I thought Hubert would understand, too, that I could tell him when we were married how it had happened . . .”

“ Mr. Carruthers got a holiday from the Bank for the occasion ? ”

“ Well, as it happened he had had a very urgent summons to Paris. He has an old uncle living there, an old man with a great deal of property, who had begged Hubert to come over and put his affairs in order for him. He was ill and not expected to live long. At first Hubert thought it would be impossible, because all the holidays at the Bank of England are arranged beforehand, and it is difficult to get them altered. But he went and explained the whole matter, and at last he got leave to change the date of his holiday and to take a fortnight in Paris now. And so we fitted our wedding for the same time, and he was to take me to Paris for our honeymoon.”

“ Oh, my dear,” John cried, dismayed. “ Oh, this has been hard on you ! Were you actually married on Tuesday ? Then that pretty dress, the violets. . . . It was your wedding dress ! You left me that day after lunch to be married ? ”

“ Yes . . . yes. We were married at half-past two.”

“ And you came back to sit for me ? He let you come ? ”

“ Oh, that was nothing. We had agreed to slip in and out as privately as possible for fear anyone should see me, or have heard anything and should be there to snapshot us. It's so difficult to be married without its being known, and I was so proud we had managed so well ! And then we were to meet in the evening and have dinner at a restaurant. And just to please me he let me ask Evelyn Paxton and one or two of my old friends. It was to be a surprise for them all. I know Mrs. Paxton and Evelyn guessed, but I didn't mind

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then. We didn't mean to tell anyone where we were going next day, but just slip off to France by a very early train. And then . . . and then . . . everything was spoilt. . . ."

"My dear, if I had only guessed anything of this!"

"I was so frightened . . . it seemed such a terrible omen, just after I had been married . . . I wanted to rush and warn Hubert, but I didn't know where he would be. . . . And then everyone said I mustn't leave the house. . . . And the time was getting on . . . and I knew the others would soon be there, waiting for me. And I didn't know what I should say to Hubert. . . . And Dr. Cathcart looked so strangely at me. . . . I can't think why he should look at me as he does. . . ."

"Oh, you poor little thing. What brutes we must have seemed!"

"No, not you, Mr. Franklin, you're always kind to everyone. But I was so wretched at the thought of having to go and meet the party when I had such a lot to explain to Mr. Carruthers. I couldn't think of anything but to send them all away and then go and find him. . . ."

"I hope he was good to you? I hope he understood?"

"No, no; it was dreadful! It made me sound so deceitful, and he was so horrified about it all . . . and so taken by surprise. . . . And I explained it so badly. . . . It seemed *hours* before he could take it in at all . . ."

"My dear, why didn't you send him round to me? If I had only known what I know now!"

"Oh, but there was no time. There were all our plans to consider . . . and what we should do if I was wanted at the inquest. . . . We hoped I mightn't be wanted. And he couldn't think what would be best to do if I was. He wanted

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to stay with me, but then he thought if the whole thing were published in the papers, the Bank people would see he had never gone to Paris, and they would think it had all been a trick on his part to get away and get married. . . . And we didn't know what to do about my giving my new name. He was so worried, he walked about for hours trying to think what to do."

John could only look his sympathy.

"And he thought the whole case so strange; he kept asking me question on question about Mr. Nelson. As if *I* knew anything about him or why he should have done such an awful thing. But Hubert was sure people would connect me with it in some way and that there would be pictures and paragraphs about me in all the papers. . . . Even though I kept telling him over and over and over, that I had hardly ever spoken to Mr. Nelson, he still seemed to think that would be everyone's impression. Oh . . . I grew sick of talking of it!"

"My dear, I'm sure you did. But what happened next?"

"We were to have gone to Paris early on Wednesday morning, you know. Hubert's uncle was worse and they had written again urging him not to delay. So I begged him to go without me if I had to stay for the inquest, and said I would follow him the moment it was over. And as the notice would be made out to me in the name of Miss Brown we thought I might leave it at that. Hubert said he would write and explain to his solicitor. We didn't know how to manage . . . and I was so miserable at having dragged him into such trouble that I only longed to do anything to help. I went round to Mrs. Paxton's next morning, hoping there might

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not be a notice for me, but there was a man on the doorstep waiting with it. And I had to take it back to Hubert . . . and he wanted to stay with me. But at last I persuaded him to go to Paris without me, though he was nearly distracted about it and so was I."

"My dear, what did you do? . . . where have you been since then?"

"Hubert took a room for me at the Albion, because we stayed there on Tuesday night, and my luggage was there, but I couldn't bear to stay amongst all those strangers. So I went round to a friend who has a little flat not far from there, and she let me sleep there——"

"Sleep?" John echoed. "Have you slept at all since Tuesday?"

"Oh, I couldn't! I kept thinking of that terrible cry Mr. Nelson gave, and of his face as he lay dead. And poor Miss Franklin . . . I was so sorry for her. I wanted to write and tell her so . . . but . . . but everything seemed so strange and difficult. . . . I didn't know what name I should sign or what to say . . ."

"You had enough trouble of your own to think of, I'm sure."

"Yes, I was *miserable* about Hubert . . . having upset him like that! . . . And I was terrified about the inquest, too. I got my friend to lend me these clothes, because I had nothing but my trousseau dresses at the Albion, and I hoped . . . hoped people wouldn't recognise me perhaps. . . . And Mr. Franklin . . . I—I said what I did about the pictures for . . . Hubert's sake . . . to spare . . ."

"My dear, don't speak of the matter. I understand entirely."

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" I would have come round to see you——"

" Now, my dear, why didn't you come ? *Why* did you hesitate ? "

" Because I was afraid . . . I thought everyone seemed angry with me . . . that you'd think I had deceived you ! And I was afraid I should meet Dr. Cathcart. . . . Mr. Franklin, why does he look at me as he does ? "

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CHAPTER X

KNIGHT ERRANT

JOHN thought the time had come to make an end of all mysteries.

"It's been such a tangle, such a misunderstanding," he said desperately. "Dr. Cathcart had an idea, forgive me if this shocks you, I'm obliged to tell you, he had an idea that Mr. Nelson had fallen in love with you."

"In love with *me*?" she interrupted. "*Mr. Nelson* in love with *me*! How could Dr. Cathcart imagine such a thing?"

"I know how impossible it must seem to you; but in some ways it wasn't so very unnatural. You see, my dear, although you make so little of the fact, you are very beautiful. He heard Harold raving about you——"

"It was impossible! Mr. Nelson knew from the first . . . I mean he guessed I was engaged to Hubert. If I was ever alone with him he always used to begin about him, always be saying, "How is the Bank of England to-day?" or "I wonder what the Bank of England would say to the progress I've made——"

"Ah!" John said suddenly, stopping her short. "He called Mr. Carruthers by that name? Wait one moment. Tell me, can you remember if he ever did so in writing to you? I should be so glad if you can tell me that."

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"Why, I don't think he wrote me more than two notes in his life. One at the beginning where he said that if the Bank of England might object to his painting me in his own studio, wouldn't I agree to his other suggestion and come to yours. And something, what was it? about my ideas of loyalty being old-fashioned. . . . I don't know, I've forgotten! And I had a note from him last Monday . . . that must be in my bag now." She searched the handbag quickly. "Here it is; do read it, Mr. Franklin. I left the envelope with you on Tuesday."

John took and read the note.

Dear Cleopatra,

I'm not sure after all about Tuesday afternoon. If the B. of E. hasn't any special claim on you I may be painting and shall be glad if you will turn up.

H, N.

"Let me keep this note, may I?" John said.

"Mr. Franklin, of course you may keep it. But you frighten me! What can you mean? How could anyone suppose Mr. Nelson cared for me? He was engaged to Miss Franklin. She could have told you it was untrue."

John got up from his chair and walked across the room, not knowing whether to speak or to keep silence, hardly daring to enlighten her, and yet afraid to leave her to learn the truth elsewhere. But she too had sprung to her feet, and was staring at him with wide, startled eyes.

"My dear," he said at last, as quietly as he could. "I can't tell you how sorry I am to add to your troubles, but I don't see how I can help it. You know my little girl is a

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spoilt, inexperienced child. I'm sorry to say she too had this idea. She had quarrelled with Mr. Nelson because she was jealous of his admiration of you."

"Oh, Mr. Franklin—don't—*don't* say it!" she cried, and pale as she had been before, she grew paler than ever, sinking down on her chair again to keep herself from falling.

"Now you mustn't make too much of this, you mustn't exaggerate it," John said, drawing his own chair nearer and laying his hand on her shoulder.

"I can't believe it! I can't believe Miss Franklin could think such a thing. It never entered my head. Why, apart from my looks I don't suppose Mr. Nelson ever gave me a thought. Artists and actors . . . they're all alike . . . that talk of theirs! It means nothing, Oh, Mr. Franklin, *you* must have known it meant nothing!"

"I never believed it of you or of him. I tried to convince Muriel; I was talking to her quite angrily that very Tuesday afternoon. I thought you might even have heard me! You didn't notice her at lunch?"

"Oh no—no—I was thinking of something else. Oh, this is terrible! On that very day, on Tuesday, the day he died——" her voice broke, and she turned and seized his hand. "But no one would connect the two? Mr. Franklin, do speak to me! No one could say that had anything to do with what happened? *That* isn't why——"

"Dear Mrs. Carruthers, I beg of you to be calm. No one who knows the facts can connect you with Mr. Nelson's unhappy death. Don't let your mind dwell on such a possibility."

"But if it was suicide . . . if Miss Franklin had quarrelled with him about me——"

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"But we hope it wasn't suicide. We hope Dr. Cathcart will be able to prove that. You heard what he said yesterday, didn't you?"

"Oh, that dreadful inquest!" she cried, closing her eyes to shut out the memory of it. "Those men staring at me . . . everyone staring and whispering. . . . And I shall have to go through it all again. . . . And I can't go to Hubert and explain . . ."

"Now, my dear, you are letting yourself be miserable about things which may never come to pass. And you're quite unkind to *me*, you know, in talking like this. Don't you feel that we're friends now? And do you suppose I'm going to desert you when I am one of the people who have let you in for all this trouble? Tell me, now, aren't you going to look on me as a friend in future?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Franklin, I know you will be kind. You have always been kind. But what can you do? How can you prevent people from saying things? Oh, if there's any sort of idea of jealousy and suicide! Those reporters—they don't care about the truth, only to get a sensation! When Hubert comes back it will be in all the papers. My picture will be everywhere. The whole story . . . our wedding . . . Hubert's name. . . . Oh, I can't bear it. . . . I can't!" and sobs shook her from head to foot.

John, who could not help remembering how he himself, from a purely selfish standpoint, had regarded much such a possibility was smitten afresh with compunction. "My dear, be a brave, sensible girl, and don't conjure up all these horrors. Listen to me, and I think you'll find I can do something . . . you know I'm only longing to help you."

She tried to stop her sobs, and turned her face towards him.

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"Don't you see that any reason for *jealousy* as regards yourself is absolutely disposed of now? If Mr. Nelson knew you cared for someone else, and his notes prove that clearly, then why should your name be mentioned at all? He knew Muriel had no cause to be jealous of you. The pity is," and he sighed, "the pity is that he never explained that to her, but treated it as a huge joke and laughed at her. And she, of course, misunderstood him. But I can't see that your name need come up at all. Even if it should be proved that he committed suicide, don't you see that you stand absolutely clear?"

She listened, trying to be convinced.

"If it was suicide at all, it may have been due to something quite different, perhaps to money troubles. There is some evidence for that. He may have been gambling or speculating and lost heavily. I think that is possible."

"Perhaps," she said doubtfully. "But it seems so strange in Mr. Nelson. He was always so full of fun and nonsense. That last day at lunch when he was teasing us all! I was afraid you would see what he meant when he said that about my 'interest in the Bank.'"

"Oh, I saw nothing. I was blind," John sighed.

"And I thought he was well off; he was so generous. And his pictures were so well spoken of. I fancied he was making thousands of pounds."

"I know; it puzzles us all completely. But perhaps we shall find it was an accident, as Dr. Cathcart suggests. He is very clever, you know, and he'll do anything he can to help us—especially now—especially when he finds out how mistaken he has been about you. And as for Muriel——"

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"Oh, you'll tell her, you will tell her? I did want her to like me!"

"I want her to know you. She's a generous child, and she'll be heartbroken to have done you such injustice. She'll be only too thankful to be forgiven. Now promise me you'll think of what I've said and not dwell on all those other possibilities."

"Yes," she said more quietly. "If only I can get Hubert to understand. He's so upset about it all, and I can't explain in writing. He wanted me to see his solicitor if the inquest was adjourned; but I'm so tired . . . I can't begin all over again to a stranger . . ."

"Give me the solicitor's address. I'll see him and arrange everything. I'll see Mr. Turner, too."

"I'd rather trust you than anyone," she said.

"Oh, my dear, you make me feel a worm!" John cried. "But there's another thing. Why shouldn't you go to Paris for these few days even if you have to come back for Thursday?"

"But the young man who gave me the notice of the inquest said he didn't think I should be allowed to leave England. I saw him outside the court yesterday and asked him. I'm always meeting him; sometimes I think he must be following me about. And the proprietor of the Albion, too. . . . I've kept the room, although I don't sleep there because my boxes are there. But he looked at me so hard yesterday when I went to see if there were any letters for me and he said, 'Excuse me, are you *Mrs. Carruthers*?' and I'm sure he didn't believe me when I said 'yes.' It's all so strange!" Her tired eyes rested on John with a pitiful enquiry, and to divert her thoughts he said hastily:

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"I'll see Turner, and if there's any power on this earth that can accomplish it, we will get you over to Paris before forty-eight hours are out. And what's more, my dear, I mean to take you there myself, and to see Mr. Carruthers and have a long talk with him and explain everything."

"Oh, Mr. Franklin, if you could!" she cried. "But it's too much to ask you. I couldn't let you do all that for me. There's Miss Franklin, she must want you."

"Muriel has one or two people to look after her," John said drily, "and it seems to me you have no one. No, it's decided. I shall do it even if it means chartering an aeroplane."

"Oh, I should be glad if you would talk to Hubert," she said with a sob.

"Yes; but do you think I shall dare to face him if you look like this? You'll have to go to bed and sleep till I come like a fairy godfather to waken you and carry you off on the broomstick."

"You think he'll forgive me?"

"The question is whether he'll ever forgive *me*, when he hears how you've been treated by us all! But, tell me, are you any happier now?"

"Yes, yes. Oh, I've been so glad to talk and tell you everything."

"You're sure you *have* told me everything? There's nothing you're keeping back because you're afraid to speak out?"

"O-only one thing," she stammered.

"I thought as much. Now out with it! Are you afraid to be indebted to me for the price of an aeroplane?"

"No, no; not that. It was about . . . about your

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picture. You—you couldn't, when it's exhibited, you couldn't call it a portrait of Mrs. Carruthers, could you ? ”

“ It shall never be exhibited. I'll burn it ! ”

“ Mr. Franklin, no ! it's so beautiful. I want Hubert to see it.”

“ Then you shall do whatever you like with it. Shall I give it to Mr. Carruthers for a wedding-present ? ”

“ Oh, I should love it ! ” she cried, “ but I couldn't take it, it must be worth pounds and pounds.”

“ Tell me, my dear,” John said, turning suddenly on her as he stood with his back to the mantelpiece, “ do you know any of the works of Robert Louis Stevenson ? ”

“ Do I know the works . . . ? ” she echoed, bewildered. “ Why yes, a little.”

“ I'm sure Mr. Carruthers has recommended them to you as models of English style. Well, in one of Stevenson's essays, I forget which, he refers to a certain kind of emotional appeal as a brutal assault on the feelings ; the sort of thing, you understand, that no man can bear without making a blubbing fool of himself.”

“ But have I . . . ? ”

“ Yes, Mrs. Carruthers, you have. Over and over again this evening ; and I give you fair warning that if I hear a word more of the sort I shall be sobbing and crying a great deal harder than you have done. And as I don't happen to be a beautiful young woman and can't hope to look as you do at the end of it, I'm going to ask you to spare me.”

“ You're laughing at me,” she said at last, relieved.

“ I tell you I'm on the verge of unmanly tears ; just the condition induced by a B.A.F. Will you try to remember

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those initials and avoid them in future? Recollect I'm a Victorian and a man of sentiment! I can't stand it."

"I'll try to avoid making a B.A.F.," she said, still a little bewildered.

"Then let us get to business at once. Where are you intending to sleep to-night?"

"I had hardly decided."

"Well, let me decide for you. What if I take you back to those friends of yours, the Paxtons? I'm sure she's a nice woman and will take care of you."

"Do you know her?"

"Oh, I know lots of things you don't suspect. But, tell me, will you go there until I can arrange the journey to Paris?"

"I don't know . . ." she faltered. "Mrs. Paxton and Evelyn . . . they'll ask me so many questions. And the neighbours. . . ."

"Yes, yes, I understand all about the neighbours, but they're not worth thinking about. As for Mrs. Paxton and Evelyn, leave them to me. Will you trust me? Will you come?"

"Yes," she said at last.

"Then first of all give me Mr. Carruthers's address in Paris and his telephone number if you have it. That's right; that's excellent! What a beautiful clear hand he writes; is that because he's in the Bank of England?"

"Yes; it's the first necessity."

"Well, now go across the passage to Muriel's room and bathe that aching head of yours and those poor tired eyes. There's hot water laid on, and I can guarantee there are all

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the proper etceteras . . . what are they? bath-salts, eau-de-cologne, vanishing creams? You go and use them all and come back to me like Venus new-risen from the foam."

"But . . . but I haven't thanked you . . ." she stammered.

"Now, now, not another B.A.F., please!"

"Only you've been so good to me . . . and I've no claim on you."

"Don't talk to me about claims. Do as I tell you while I slip down and get you a glass of wine and a biscuit."

"Please, Mr. Franklin! I couldn't touch either."

"Then I shall be very much offended. Am I to be the first person to entertain a bride after her wedding and be forbidden to drink to her happiness? Why, I keep a brand of horrible sweet champagne especially for young ladies, and I've never had a refusal yet! Now here's Muriel's room. Let me put on the light for you."

Shutting the door on her, he ran quickly down to the den, Mrs. Smith emerging when she heard his step.

"Did you want anything, sir?"

"Yes, and as soon or sooner than you can possibly get it, please. A bottle of that sweet champagne that Miss Muriel likes, two glasses, and some biscuits or spongecakes. Then get me a taxi with the hood up."

"Two glasses, sir? In your study?"

"No, *here*! I'll take it up."

It was but five or six minutes before he was back in the room, but his visitor was already there, in the long chair, her face and hair smoothed into order. But now she lay back half-stupefied with weariness, hardly able to raise her eyelids.

"All the better!" John thought as he held a glass to

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her lips and forced her to swallow something. Then taking the other and raising it bravely to his own, "Here, Mrs. Carruthers, I'm drinking all good wishes to you and to your husband! and to the journey which you and I are to take, and which will re-unite you!"

She tried to rouse herself and smile; but without waiting for a reply he chatted on in tones gentle enough to lull her back into drowsiness:

"Yes, that's the plan. We're off to Paris on Sunday at the latest. We'll go and call for your boxes at the Albion, and all you'll have to do is to get out one of those smart frocks and put it on. Now don't interrupt! Do you think I'd allow the Parisians to get an idea that our English brides can't beat them in frocks as well as in looks? What would Mr. Carruthers think of me? Why, I mean to buy a new top-hat for the occasion! But if you want to do justice to me you must sleep your hardest between this and then, sleep and sleep and sleep. And if you so much as open your eyes you're just to close them again and say, 'It's all over, I'm going to Paris. Nothing and no-one can stop me!'"

As if in obedience to his words she had already slipped lower in the chair, and was in a dead sleep when the wheels of the taxi were heard at the front door. John went to the top of the stairs.

"Mrs. Smith!" he called gently. "Just come here and give me a helping hand."

"Did I hear Miss Brown's voice, sir?" she asked as she joined him.

"Ah, that's the question: *did* you?" he answered, not unwilling to mystify the wise woman, and he gently pushed open the door.

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As her eyes fell on the sleeping figure, so beautiful in its child-like abandonment and unconsciousness, she started.

"Oh, sir, if you could paint her like that!"

"Hush, Nanny, don't talk of such a thing. The idea would scandalise her husband."

"Miss Brown is married?" she said quickly.

"Very much married! Now don't pretend you guessed as much."

"I won't, sir, for I didn't," the wise woman confessed, "but may I ask——?"

"It's no one we know. I'll tell you all about it another time. Help me now to get her into a taxi and let me be off. I'll be back to dinner. Just try to get the poor little thing down without actually waking her. She's had a horrible time of it."

Between them they supported the sleeping girl to the taxi, where John settled her amongst rugs and cushions, and where she sank back again on the instant. Then calling directions to the driver he slipped in beside her on a second journey to Laburnum Villas.

Only once did the jolting of the wheels rouse her, when she started up crying out as she clutched at the hand stretched forth to take her own: "Oh . . . it's true, isn't it? It isn't only a dream? . . . It is all over . . . and you will . . . you will take me to Paris?"

.

John stopped the taxi within a few doors of No. 14, and slipped out of it as quietly as he had slipped in. Then telling the driver that if the lady spoke or asked for him she was to be brought on to the house, he went up to it and rang

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the bell. It was nearly dark now, and if the heads on the opposite side of the street gathered again to observe him, he was quite unconscious of the fact. Mrs. Paxton, rather wearier than before, opened the door to him after a long wait, her manner saying plainer than spoken words, "What is it *now* ? "

It changed, however, at once when she recognised her visitor. "Why, Mr. Franklin, I never thought you would be back so soon."

"Soon ? "

"Well, so soon after this morning."

"Oh, was it only this morning ? I thought it was about a month ago," John said. "I'm afraid it ~~is~~ dreadfully soon to bother you again ! Mrs. Paxton, I've come to you as an actual beggar this time."

"Then I'm afraid you've come to the wrong house ! But do come in, Mr. Franklin. My daughter's at home now ; perhaps you'd like to see her."

John walked once more into the little sitting-room, this time rather more crowded than in the morning by the presence of large masses of millinery, besides that of a very pretty fair-haired girl who got up and greeted him at once with the same straightforward simplicity as marked her mother.

"Heavens, what a lot of beauty there is amongst these cinema people !" John thought ; but the steady curiosity of the girl's look recalled him.

"You are Phyllis's friend ? " she said.

"It's what I want to be," John replied, thankful for the forthright and direct opening.

"Then you know where she is and what's happened to her ? "

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"I know both, to a certain extent, and I've come here to tell you. But it's a long story, and it would take me hours perhaps to unravel it all. That's one of my difficulties at the moment. I want to tell you, but the time's so limited. You see"—turning to Evelyn, with just the frank look that hers demanded—"your friend is just now in a taxi, outside here——"

"*Outside!* Why on earth doesn't she come in?" the girl exclaimed, making a start for the door.

"Because she's so fast asleep, so utterly worn out and overdone that I wanted to see you before I roused her. I couldn't bear to do it until I was sure——"

"But what can have happened? What *is* all the mystery about?" Evelyn cried, and her mother's eyes were fixed on John's face with a like question.

"Well, to begin with . . . you know or guess she was married on Tuesday last," John began, speaking with difficulty.

"She *was* married then?" the two women echoed, exchanging looks.

"She was married to a gentleman called Mr. Carruthers . . . someone I have never seen and never heard of before to-day. But it seems he was rather sensitive on the subject of a sensational wedding and did not want to be greeted with a battery of cameras as he left the registry office, did not want to see in the papers next day a series of snapshots of himself and his filmstar-bride——"

"Oh—h," Evelyn said with complete comprehension, "I see. . . . *That* sort!"

"Just that sort, Miss Paxton. And for that reason and that reason only the whole thing was made, as you say, a mystery."

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"Ah," remarked the mother.

"To ensure a more complete secrecy the bride and bridegroom parted immediately they left the office, meaning to meet again in the evening at dinner, where they hoped to give you, Miss Paxton, and some of their friends a surprise; and where the husband was to be introduced to you all."

"Just as we thought," commented the other two.

"Their plan was to go off to Paris early next morning before any reporters or photographers were awake to spot them. Mr. Carruthers had already been summoned there by the illness of an uncle, whose affairs he undertook to put in order. It was almost a life-and-death matter, you understand, and he had had some difficulty in getting away from his work; so he arranged his honeymoon to fit in at the same time."

The two listeners were intent on his words; but John felt his difficulties increase and he strove hurriedly to compress the sequel.

"To fill in the time after she left the registrar's, Mrs. Carruthers, whose portrait I was painting, came to sit for me as usual. And there was . . . there was . . ." he hesitated. . . . "At my studio there was another artist who was also making a sketch of her. And unhappily—most unhappily, a terrible accident happened to him that very afternoon . . . and he fell dead at his easel. . . . You, Mrs. Paxton, said you read something about the death of a Chelsea artist on that day. It was my friend."

The sudden gravity of his tone checked the exclamations of the two women, but in the pause John seemed to discern strange conjectures.

"You'll understand how painful the whole thing is to

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me when I tell you this artist was not only a friend ; he was more than that, he was engaged to my own daughter."

" Mr. Franklin, don't say any more, it's too hard on you ! " Mrs. Paxton cried out. " Just tell us what we can do for you and we'll do it."

" Thank you with all my heart ; but I want you to know this poor girl's share in all this. It has been as hard on her as on anyone. She had no sort of concern in it ; but she has been dragged in and made to suffer as if she had. There was this terrible shock coming right on top of her wedding ; and then she was told she would have to stay and be present at the inquest. That meant she could not go to Paris next morning : although her husband was pledged to go that very day."

This was a tale to move both mother and daughter. Their commiseration was all for poor Phyllis now.

" I needn't tell you what a wretched time she's been through . . . left alone here, and quite unnerved by the shock. And I'm sorry . . . more sorry than I can say that I myself was so taken up with . . . with other aspects of the tragedy, my own daughter . . . you understand . . ."

" Anyone would understand, Mr. Franklin."

" I knew nothing actually, nothing until just now. I had no idea this morning when I came here that she was even married. I was as puzzled about the poor girl as you were. She came round this afternoon to see me, quite by chance, and now the mystery is cleared up——"

" And you've brought her back to us ? And quite right too," Mrs. Paxton said. " I'll look after her. Dear, what a story ! I don't know who to pity most."

" I shall be thankful to think of the poor little thing safe

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with you. If you can keep her in bed for twenty-four hours I might get time to arrange things. I want to take her over to Paris to her husband the very first moment it's possible. But you'll guess the sort of state she must be in. She probably hasn't slept one minute since Tuesday, and she looks a wreck. She isn't fit to talk . . . she needs absolute quiet. Would it be too much trouble . . . ? ”

“ Why, Mr. Franklin, she's not a stranger to us ! I'd do as much for any girl in such straits, and she's an old friend. Don't be thinking of *us* ! Now, Evelyn, you needn't begin to cry ; that won't help anyone, and I expect Mr. Franklin's had quite enough of that already. Run upstairs and get the sheets on the bed. And if you can promise to be quiet and not talk to her you might take your own mattress in and sleep on the couch or somewhere. She'll perhaps be nervous after such a fright. That'll be right, won't it, Mr. Franklin ?

“ Absolutely ; only I know this must be putting you to a great deal of trouble . . . and I don't know how I can ever thank you for such kindness.”

“ Well, as for kindness,” Mrs. Paxton said with her demure smile, “ I should say Phyllis will understand well enough where she owes thanks for *that*. Just leave her to me and we'll do the best we can for her. I'll send you word how she goes on, so don't worry about her. She'll be all right when she can get to her husband, and till then the quieter she keeps the better. Let me go and fetch her. Asleep, you say ? Poor child ! ”

It was but a moment later that she fulfilled her words, and the half-conscious girl was brought from the taxi to the house. Then with finger on lip Mrs. Paxton signed to John that he should slip away—her smile and nod conveying to

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him that he need take no formal farewell of them. He stayed only to see Evelyn run downstairs and put her arms gently round her friend, murmuring, "Why, Phyllis . . . oh, you poor dear!"—then, springing into the now empty taxi, he escaped.

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CHAPTER XI

INTERLUDE

It was towards half-past eight that same evening when Inspector Turner was shown upstairs to the little room which he found particularly cosy and attractive, and its master thoroughly refreshed after a rest and a good dinner. Mrs. Smith had received him on his return with her usual tactful silence. No question or hint of enquiry showed in her face or manner ; though John could not help suspecting that she must be inwardly aching to learn something of his late visitor and the meaning of her visit. He was in no mood just then to enlighten her, but yielded himself up entirely to her soothing ministrations. All was in readiness ; his bath, his dinner, his pipe. Even the little room itself seemed reordered, and bore no trace of the afternoon's agitations. Were the flowers changed—the chairs differently disposed ? He could not tell ; he only perceived that it wore a fresh and smiling aspect, and his spirit responded gratefully.

The inspector, too, after hours of close work from which he had longed to escape, met his colleague in a mood very like his own, and the two men drew together in sympathetic relaxation. It was not long before John began to pour out the story of his day's adventures, beginning with his morning's pilgrimage to Nile Street, and his impressions of its inhabitants ; then through the intervening visit to his club and the gossip

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he had heard, up to the crowning events of the afternoon; relating all in his own careful fashion, with those flashes of humour and kindliness which were characteristic of the little man.

In a like manner the Inspector listened, no detail escaping him, no impatience breaking the narrative. Some notes he unobtrusively made, some facts he confirmed by an eloquent nod, and as John drew to an end and faced him with the words, "And that's the whole story!" he slapped his notebook on his knee with a cry of admiration.

"Mr. Franklin, you've been splendid! You've done better even than I expected. You ought to have been a detective, you ought, indeed!"

"God forbid!" John exclaimed.

"No, don't say that . . . don't, sir! I'm sure you see my meaning. I'm sure you're glad you've been able to straighten things out for that poor girl. Our work isn't only just finding out the guilty, there's the clearing the innocent too. There's a lot of human nature to be learnt in our business. People are as different often enough from what you expect as night is from day. And even *facts*, that you laugh at me for being so particular about, *they* turn out so different from what you'd think, too. There they are; you can't get away from them. You see them; you say—then, this being so, why, this must follow of a necessity; there seems no other inference to be drawn. And then something—some turn or twist—seems to come and shake the whole matter upside down and you find you're wrong everywhere and have to start all over again from the beginning. It needs a strong head to deal with facts . . . and a lot of patience, too."

"I'm sure of that," John agreed heartily.

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"Yes, and it needs something more than patience and something more than justice, though I can't ever quite hit on the right word for it. But whatever it is, *you've* got it, sir. I wish I could set you up as a model to some of our men."

"Oh!"

"Lord, what a mess they do make of things sometimes, even when they do get hold of the truth! Now take this story you've told me. I can check it everywhere by the facts my own men have got together. The young lady was married, as they found, last Tuesday at 2.30 at the registry office in Arch Street to a man called Carruthers, and he and she spent the night at the Albion Street Hotel. That's all plain sailing anyone could discover that. But he left her first thing next morning and never turned up again, nor appeared with her at the inquest—and I've been racking my brains all day for an explanation of that. And who on earth this Mr. Carruthers could be, and how he came into the story at all. Something in the Bank of England, they tell me. I was just going to start making enquiries about him."

"Turner, do nothing of the kind! I beg you won't for any reason whatever send anyone there to ask questions about Mr. Carruthers."

"You're joking, sir. You know well enough there are men from the Yard every day of the year at the Bank of England."

"I know well enough they go to some little underground vault there to examine false notes and discuss forgeries and trifles of that sort. But those things are nothing. Nothing at all compared to the act of asking questions about a man who represents the Currency of England itself. I assure you I'm not joking. It would be a vital matter. It might shake the credit of all Europe. It might interfere with his

promotion. Turner, you must give me your word of honour that no such deed shall ever be done."

"I don't think there'll be any necessity for it, sir."

"If there is you must come to me for information. I can supply you with all you'll ever need about Mr. Carruthers. I can tell you when he was born ; how much he then weighed ; when he cut his first tooth ; when he refused to tell his first lie ; what public school he was at——"

"And what school may it have been, sir ? " Mr. Turner asked with a grin.

"I said I could supply you with the information. I didn't say I had it at my fingers' ends at this moment. Stop, though, as to his school—let me see, I was at Westminster myself. Well, then, he will have been at Charterhouse. Yes, certainly, Charterhouse it will have been."

The Inspector shook his head as at an incorrigible child. "Well, sir, I'm sure you'd never try to intimidate an officer of the Law from doing his duty, so we'll leave that point. But to go on with what I was saying about facts and their turning out so different when you turn a different light on them. Just think of that note we found in Mr. Nelson's studio, for instance. Look over it again now, sir, and see how completely the meaning seems to be changed by what you've found out since." And opening his notebook he handed the half-sheet to John, who read again the words :

Beauteous Cleopatra,

If the Bank of England refuses to be accommodating then do I beg of you fall back on my alternative suggestion. Why these wretched scruples about what other people think and say ? Your out-of-date notions about loyalty——

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John mused in silence for a few minutes : " You're quite right, Turner. It is strange that facts should bear such different interpretations, and turn out so unexpectedly. You must see a lot of this sort of thing. How do you deal with it ? "

" Well, sir, I've often told you, I haven't any fixed plan. I never can work on theories, nothing on the grand lines as some people can. What I always aim at is to get all the facts of a case and all the statements I can from everyone who could possibly have any concern in it."

" But what if some people are liars ? I don't mean deliberate liars, but just ordinary folk incapable of correct observation or coherent statement ? "

" You've just got to be patient, you see, sir. Even lies if you examine them patiently will sometimes give you a lot of the truth. It's a queer thing, but I've often found it so."

" Turner, you're getting modern and paradoxical. But do you mean in actual criminals, or how ? "

" Not necessarily criminals ; sometimes they're witnesses who think they're speaking the truth. You've got to look out for a natural bias of the mind, and most people have a bias of some sort."

" Yes, I suppose that is so. Well, but when you've amassed this queer lot of facts and statements, the true and the false, what next ? "

" That's what I was getting at just now, sir. That quality I couldn't find a name for. Say you've got all those facts and statements all thrown together ; then you've got to sort them and test them. *That's* where something needs to be added, something that'll clear the true metal from the alloy."

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But I'm never quite sure what that something should be . . . whether you'd call it sympathy, or imagination, or just the power of getting away from things and looking all round them, if you see what I mean."

"I see what you mean all right, but I can't help you to a single word that will give it a name!" John declared. "But I can tell you where you'd find your exact process worked out *quite shortly and simply*, by a man called Robert Browning in a little poem named 'The Ring and the Book. In fact, I believe you've sneaked in here when I was out and made a half-hour's summary of that plain, straightforward work."

"I'm afraid I've never even heard of it, sir. 'The Ring and the Book': I thought it was a fairy-tale play, or a pantomime of sorts."

"No, you're mixing it up with a piece called 'The Rose and the Ring,' by one William Makepeace Thackeray Browning and Thackeray! Really, Turner, you're giving me a headache with your highbrow allusions. What next!"

"Queerly enough, I *was* thinking of another play. I wonder if you know it? A thing called, 'And That's the Truth.' Did you ever happen to see it, Mr. Franklin?"

"What, Pirandello, now! And you call it a 'thing.' Turner, you astound me. No, I never saw it. Tell me about it."

"Well, there was a play, sir, that nearly drove me mad. It really did."

"I can believe that. But why?"

"Not a word of sense to be made of it. Every single character that came on started a yarn that a baby could have

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seen was nonsense ; and then another would start in and tell another, contradicting the first ; and then a third contradicting them both, and so on. And all the rest of the characters listened and swallowed the whole lot without having the sense to try and test one single fact. Not that it mattered in the end ; for it made no odds whatever to anyone that I could see whether the yarns were true or false. I don't know why such a thing should be written. And yet people were saying it was all very clever."

"That's because you haven't a really up-to-date mind, Turner. But what makes you recall this masterpiece just now ? "

"Because there was just this about it, it did show how people look on facts and select only those that fit in with some idea of their own. Now take a man like Dr. Cathcart, for instance."

"Yes," John said, suddenly serious. "I've been thinking of him, too. He shall know this very night what an absolute and entire mistake he made ; and where it nearly led us all ! You're right, Turner. It's horribly dangerous to start with a theory and then look for facts to confirm it. Poor Muriel, too, *she'll* have to hear how wrong her suspicions were. It'll add to her remorse ; but she must be told that there wasn't a grain of truth in what she thought about Harold and that little girl Phyllis Brown. I can't spare Muriel there. But, oh dear, we're as far as ever from knowing how or why poor Nelson died ! "

"It seems so at the moment, sir, and I shall want some more help from you. We haven't got all the facts yet, by any means. But it's because you have that quality which I've been talking about that you can help me. And it's

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because Dr. Cathcart hasn't got it that he hasn't, with all his cleverness, been a bit of use to us."

"Poor Ernest; he wants to be of use; but he was prejudiced, as you say."

"He sees the facts," Mr. Turner insisted, "but he can't do what you do. He can't put one thing against another and balance them."

"He's never learnt how colours will alter one another when they're side by side."

"That's your way of putting what I mean. When he found that Mr. Nelson had committed suicide he could only see one motive for it—the motive that confirmed a preconceived notion of his own."

"It'll be a frightful shock to him, this revelation about Miss Brown. He was convinced of the other theory. He did genuinely believe it, Turner."

"Yes, sir, and there did seem to be a good deal of evidence to mislead him. But you see what I mean, and why he has been of no use."

"Well, he shall know the truth now if I have to sit up till midnight to write it. He's been at Beckenham all day; but I always send letters or notes to his laboratory because I don't trust the people at the place where he lodges. I'll get a messenger to take this round when it's written and he'll get it as soon as he comes back; he always calls there for his letters. But, Turner, I believe this will be the touchstone for him. He'll be shaken out of all that prejudice and will speak out at last. You'll see, he's got a better side than you know. I believe he'll surprise you yet. I believe he'll clear up the whole mystery for us."

"That wouldn't surprise me at all. If he can give his

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mind to the problem without prejudice, I think he might solve it ; and as you say, this may just put him on his mettle and make him determine to do the big thing in a big way. But now, sir, I **must** be making a move ; though it's a temptation to stay here and talk with you ! But you've your letter to write and I've got to go down to the studio and collect one or two little things. I'll let myself out afterwards. Don't you disturb yourself again."

"One moment, Turner. About taking that poor little thing to Paris. I promised to do it and I've set my heart on it. You'll let me go, won't you ? Even if she has to come back for Thursday's inquest, she needn't be kept a prisoner here any longer, need she ? "

"I can't see any necessity for it at all, Mr. Franklin, at the moment. But let me think things over. We'll see better how we stand by this time to-morrow, I hope. I want to go through those papers of Mr. Nelson's more carefully. Will you meet me at his flat to-morrow morning at ten o'clock ? And ask Dr. Cathcart to come too, if you like. Now, sir, I'm off. Good-night, and don't sit up too late over your letter."

With this he left the room and for quite a long time afterwards John heard him moving about on the floor below. Then the front door closed quietly behind him, and all was still in the house. Meantime, John wrote on steadily.

CHAPTER XII

THE MARSHALLING OF FACTS

STRANGE, John thought, that after such a tranquil evening he should have such a harassed night. Not that he had any difficulty in getting to sleep ; on the contrary, he dropped off almost as his head was on the pillow. But his dreams had been troubled, filled with strange distress, haunted. He woke suddenly in the dark with a cry—Was it his own ? Or had someone called his name ? He turned on his light. The wind had risen and was moaning about the house, blowing the blinds and curtains about, and they in turn had knocked something down. He got up and shut and fastened the window, then returned to his bed. There was a sound as though something were beating against the panes ; a gull perhaps, they sometimes came up from the river in a storm. He lay down once more and put out the light, trying to sleep. What was it sailors believed about sea-gulls, those strange birds with their strange, questing eyes ? But why should he think of this just now ? He dozed, then started awake thinking again that he heard someone call him. He listened ; all was silent in the house. Was someone wanting him ? Muriel ? That poor child who had appealed to him this afternoon ? Was she in delirium and calling on him ? He put on the light again and took a book ; but could not read.

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"Nerves! I'm letting this business get on my nerves," he thought. "As soon as it's possible I'll go abroad with Muriel for a change."

Towards morning he dozed but woke finally, thankful for the daylight, even though it brought with it rain and clouds, and for himself a corresponding heaviness of spirit.

As soon as he decently could he telephoned to Muriel. Her own voice answered him. All was well with her. "——And oh, Daddy, Ernest has brought me my ring!" A note left by hand in an unknown writing made his heart beat unaccountably, and he almost trembled as he opened it. It was from Mrs. Paxton, and in a couple of lines told him that "Phyllis" had slept through the whole night and was sleeping still at the time of writing. He sent a maid round to Dr. Cathcart's lodgings to enquire for him and to ask him to come round as soon as possible. The girl returned with the information that Dr. Cathcart had gone away yesterday morning in a car with another gentleman, a Mr. Bertram, and had not returned.

"Stayed at Beckenham, and hasn't had my letter yet," John reflected. "Well, he's all right too, or Muriel would have told me. I'm nervous, that's what it is."

He set out rather earlier than needful to meet the inspector, hoping the latter would not notice anything amiss. But the inspector who was waiting for him seemed preoccupied too and not inclined to notice anything. He said very little by way of greeting, but at once invited John to jump on a bus with him.

"But where are we going?" John asked, surprised. "I thought it was to be the flat and those papers again."

"Not just now," Mr. Turner answered. "I want you

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to see that man, MacDonald, the bookmaker, you know."

"You have found out who it is then, and his address?"

"You gave me the hint when you told me what was said at your club yesterday. Don't you remember, 'that man MacDonald who has an office in Regent Street next to the jeweller's.'"

"Ah yes. So you've identified him? What are his initials? Is he possibly G.M.?"

"No, sir, his name is Donald."

"And he knows you are coming round?"

"He knows you are coming, sir; that you're Mr. Nelson's executor. I 'phoned to him when I heard from you yesterday and said we would come to-day or Monday."

His tone and manner were short, and John asked him no more.

When they got off the omnibus the Inspector started at once to give him minute instructions as to what to say to the bookmaker, how to approach him, how to frame his questions and John was thankful for this as his own mind was a blank, his brain still obsessed by nightmare, a relic of his troubled sleep. It would have helped him if he could have laughed at himself and stirred Turner to laughter too; but Turner was certainly grave and uncommunicative this morning. Perhaps he felt a difficulty in getting up interest again in the case, after yesterday's stirring discoveries. A feeling of anti-climax.

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All this had happened this morning; it was now afternoon towards three o'clock, and John was at home again once more, in his study, the interview with Mr. Donald MacDonald

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behind him, over, finished. Well, not actually finished perhaps, but finished so far as himself was concerned. And that interview itself? He tried to go over it again calmly now that he was alone, and to see its actual significance. Few events had ever seemed, at the moment, more baffling and inconclusive.

Their first entry of the man's office ; the fine room with its massive furniture, its red walls and dark soft carpet ; Frith's " Derby Day " on one wall, a quite excellent reproduction. Of course ; just what he might have expected. And some really good sporting-prints of horses and dogs : these must be valuable, and John would have liked to examine them ; but Inspector Turner at once turned to do so, leaving him to introduce himself to Mr. MacDonald.

A typical Scotchman, this ; tall, lean, with hair between grey and sandy, eyebrows to match, and beneath them steady grey-blue eyes. A close-shut mouth with creases runnin from the nose to the corners of the lips ; a hard mouth, but not a cruel one, John thought. A hard face altogether, but not a mean one, nor a dishonest. A well-dressed man with rather stooping shoulders, or else he got his stoop from bending his head to look into the eyes of shorter men. John felt particularly small and insignificant as he mentioned his name and business, and this from the start put him at a disadvantage. He was conscious at the time, and was conscious now, of some want of grip, some failure to seize upon any essential point.

Mr. MacDonald began by speaking of Mr. Nelson with shrewd appreciation, expressing regret at his tragic death—" tragic and, as it seems, inexplicable," was his phrase ; but he said the words without any special significance. His

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manner was impersonal throughout. Mr. Franklin was Mr. Nelson's executor? He had gathered that. There was no outstanding account. He had done little or no business with Mr. Nelson of late.

But this was a point that Mr. Franklin was prepared to contest. In going through Mr. Nelson's papers the case appeared quite otherwise; the transactions during the last month or six weeks, for instance, had markedly increased both in number and extent. He quoted figures challengingly.

Mr. MacDonald heard him courteously, and courteously held to his previous statement. John produced a sheet of figures to prove his point. Mr. MacDonald took the paper and studied it in silence. So long a silence that John began to grow impatient, and even the inspector glanced round to see what was happening. It was returned at last, and Mr. MacDonald, who made no comment on what he had been studying, merely repeated that he had had no considerable transactions with Mr. Nelson for some months before his death.

"Then, did Mr. MacDonald deny," John demanded, "that these sums of money (betting debts, apparently) had passed into his hands?"

Mr. MacDonald denied nothing. He remarked merely, "They were paid by a bearer-cheque, I believe?"

"Then you admit they were paid; that you yourself drew the money?"

Mr. MacDonald neither admitted nor denied these facts.

"Will you give me a plain answer to this question, Yes or No. Did Mr. Nelson write a cheque for £500 for you only a week before his death?"

Mr. MacDonald demurred at this. It was against his rules to disclose his clients' transactions.

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"But you have practically admitted it already!" John exclaimed, getting ruffled. "How can you say he had not been betting lately? Betting and losing, too, as he has never done in his life before, apparently! All his recent bets have been losses. He has lost over £500 in the last two months whereas his biggest transaction during the two previous years hasn't exceeded £15. Can you explain these facts?"

Mr. MacDonald did not undertake to explain facts.

"But don't you see the contradiction?" John exclaimed. "He must have lost on every occasion and there's no corresponding gain anywhere. Doesn't that show something unusual?"

The Scotchman was silent. Urged further, he repeated that he could not disclose a client's secrets.

"But what secret can there be now the man is dead? His affairs have to be examined; everything must sooner or later come out!" Mr. MacDonald merely bowed in acquiescence to this, and was silent again.

"Mr. MacDonald," the inspector said, turning from his study of the sporting-prints and speaking for the first time, "you know who I am. I don't want to put any pressure on you, but you know it can be applied."

Mr. MacDonald admitted tranquilly that he knew Inspector Turner at once and was glad to meet him again after a long absence. "Too long an absence," if he might say so.

"And you know I'm simply stating the facts."—Oh, certainly; Mr. MacDonald knew well enough that Mr. Turner would say nothing but what was correct.

"Then will you give Mr. Franklin, as Mr. Nelson's executor, the information he wants?"

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Mr. MacDonald was lost in thought for some moments, and when he did at last speak it was to admit that the case was not as simple as it seemed. There were complications ; or perhaps he should say *a* complication.

“ Of what nature ? ”

He was not at liberty to reveal its nature.

“ I need not remind a man of your experience,” Mr. Turner here remarked, “ that an executor can claim for cheques drawn for betting debts, that Mr. Franklin has a right to demand that the account be produced.” Mr. MacDonald admitted his knowledge of these facts. Inspector Turner was quite correct. But in the present case . . . well, he had mentioned, there was a complication.

“ Then will you tell us this much ? Were these transactions actually Mr. Nelson’s own, or were they incurred on behalf of someone else ? ” Mr. MacDonald regretted that his rules made it impossible for him to answer such a question. John pressed it eagerly, “ Mr. MacDonald, will you just say Yes or No to the fact, if we leave it at that and do not press for names ? ”

But to say either Yes or No seemed also an impossibility and an insuperable one. Indeed, it might be doubted whether the Scotchman had ever in his life committed himself to either monosyllable, and John felt himself to be as far as ever from his goal, and knew himself to be getting warm and irritated.

“ Well, Mr. MacDonald,” the inspector said at last, and John envied his calm, “ you will have seen that the adjourned inquest on Mr. Nelson takes place on Thursday afternoon next. The whole question of his financial position will be raised then, and if you have no information to give us here

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and now, I must advise that you be asked for it in the witness-box in court."

As to that, Mr. MacDonald would consult his solicitor. He would communicate later with Mr. Franklin or Mr. Turner.

"I will call for the information on Monday next at this hour," the inspector said equably. "Good morning, Mr. MacDonald," and he looked towards John, who rose to his feet thankful for the release.

"A moment, Mr. Turner," the Scotchman said just as they were passing out. John took this to mean that he was not wanted, and shutting himself into the passage, walked to the front door where a page-boy already waited with his hat and stick. On the doorstep he drew in a long breath of fresh air. The inspector joined him a moment later.

"Well, Turner? What do you make of him?"

"Oh, a good sort, a very good sort," the Inspector said warmly, "my word, sir, we were fortunate!"

"Were we? You surprise me."

"Why, there's not a straighter man in the sporting world than old Donald! I knew we were all right the moment I found out it was him."

"You were satisfied with the interview?"

"I was, sir. We got all we wanted from him, for the time being."

"Did we?"

"Why yes, sir, considering our position."

"*Our* position? I should have thought his was the peculiar one. It seemed to me that he was deliberately withholding information, and only yielded a fraction under threats from you."

"Oh, that was bluff, sir, that was all talk. He might

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have denied he was the man Mr. Nelson had transactions with ; and with those bearer-cheques it might have taken weeks to prove the fact. He might have put us in a brute of a hole. You see we were bluffing, too."

"Were we? Was I bluffing? "

"Why yes, sir ; don't you see it? "

"No," John said, "but of course, if you're satisfied—— But what about this complication that he talks of? Is that only bluff, or is there something behind it? Or someone? "

"I think there's something behind it," Mr. Turner said.

"You think we may be on the track of a possible black-mailer after all? This G. M.—or whoever it is? "

"We may be."

"Did Mr. MacDonald give you any sort of clue to the identity when he called you back? "

"He told me no more than he told you. But he did give me a hint that may prove useful."

"More mysteries! " John sighed.

"It may come to nothing at all ; but I think I'll ask you to excuse me now, Mr. Franklin, and I'll be off. I want to follow it up."

"But where on earth are you going, Turner? "

"To Jermyn Street, sir."

"Jermyn Street? More bookies? "

"No, sir. Not a bookie this time ; but I'd better be getting off. It's Saturday, and people may be going out of town if I leave it too late."

"I'm not to come with you? " John said, surprised and disconcerted at his manner.

"Not this time, sir ; I'll be round early this afternoon and tell you how I've fared. You'll stay in till I come, will

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you, please? It'll probably be between four and five." With these words he turned sharply round, sprang on to a passing bus and in a moment was lost to sight.

These were the morning's events which John was now considering in retrospect.

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A ring at the front door presently roused him, and, listening, he heard someone admitted. It was too early for Turner, barely three o'clock; this would be Ernest, who, having returned from Beckenham and having read John's letter, had rushed round at once to see him! John's spirits rose in relief and he realised suddenly how much he wanted to see Ernest. Poor Ernest, he would be overwhelmed to think of the injustice he had done his dead friend, and would be ready now to pour out his heart in amends. For the first time since Tuesday John would be alone with him. Stupid not to have arranged it before! He might have known Ernest would never speak freely before others; and John was convinced that when he did speak Ernest could and would help them, would be as eager now to atone for his ungrounded suspicions as he formerly had been to impress them. "And it was partly Harold's own fault; yes, he brought it partly on himself," John thought; "I'll let poor Ernest see that I recognise that, and don't entirely blame him." And with the thought he sprang up and went half-way down to greet his visitor.

But it was not Ernest after all. Only Inspector Turner again, hanging up his coat in the hall with his back turned to the stairs.

The disappointment was so sharp that John could hardly

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hide it. Turner had been preoccupied and uncommunicative all day, with an uneasy air about him which puzzled and baffled his friend, and even when he turned round he was looking not at John but at a key he had just taken from his pocket.

"You're back sooner than I expected," John said, trying to sound as usual. "Were you successful? Did you find out what you wanted?"

"Not entirely," the Inspector said, and stopped short.

"You'll come upstairs, won't you? Dr. Cathcart hasn't arrived yet, but I expect him any minute now. He spent the night at Beckenham apparently, but he's sure to be back this afternoon."

"We won't wait for him, I think, sir. No, not upstairs; I want you to come into the studio if you will."

"The studio!" John repeated. He had not been into it since the dreadful Tuesday, and now as the Inspector slowly unlocked the door, he entered and looked at the familiar surroundings as though it were weeks since he had seen them. "Can it be only four days?" he thought, "and just about this time . . . the light falling much as it does now . . . everything unchanged . . . and yet everything different!"

Then something unexpected caught his eye. Harold's easel was set up in its old place again, the unfinished picture resting upon it, with the flaring colours behind the Cleopatra catching the eye like the flash of swords.

"You did this last night?" he said. "You—you've been reconstructing the scene, I suppose. But why did you bring in Mr. Nelson's greatcoat? That wasn't here when he fell; I had taken it to Mrs. Smith's den to be repaired. Don't you remember my telling you that?"

"I remember, sir. But I was trying to get the exact

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position of things as they were when you left the studio to go to lunch on Tuesday morning. Tell me, where did Mr. Nelson throw his coat when he first came in, in the morning ? ”

“ Just where you’ve put it, on that chair to the right of the easel, the collar showing where the loop was torn away.”

“ Leave it there, then. And this little oak table, where did that stand ? ”

“ Here on the left.”

“ And can you remember what was on it when you left the room ? ”

“ Mr. Nelson’s palette, several tubes of paint, some turpentine, a painting rag, perhaps. Nothing else—except, of course, his paintbrush.”

“ How came you to notice everything so exactly ? ”

“ Oh, it’s the same every day ; but as a matter of fact I went to pick up his brushes to put them in the turps over there with my own. But as there was only one, and he might be using it after lunch, I left it.”

“ Mr. Franklin, you said the other day you could identify that paintbrush anywhere. How could that be ? How could you tell one from another ? ”

“ Oh, Turner ! Why, I should know my own anywhere. And as for Harold’s—just look at them ! Look at that collection in the turps there. See how he messed up his. Even you can tell them from mine.”

“ Yes, I see the difference between his and yours, but how could you tell any particular one of his from the others ? ”

“ Well, in this case it would be easy enough. It happened to be one I gave him. I was speaking about it at lunch that very day.”

“ Speaking about that paint-brush ? ”

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"Yes, I was accusing him of having got it out of me on false pretences. I made him promise, you see, before I gave it that he wouldn't chew the end of it."

"You referred to that at lunch?"

"Why, Turner!" John said, laughing, "you're not supposing that Harold took me seriously? Everyone at the table knew what I meant. I had shown them all at tea the day before how he had broken his promise."

"He had chewed the end of it?"

"He had; and he was chewing it again on Tuesday morning till I threatened to take it away from him and burn it."

"But he used to bite all his brushes. Could you actually have picked this one from amongst the others if they had all been standing in the turps together?"

"I not only could, but I will. It has my own initials and his scratched on the stem. Nothing could be easier."

"One minute, sir. You say you can swear to the brush?"

"Anywhere. With those initials on it, how could I miss it?"

"And you think it was lying on the table here when you went to lunch on Tuesday?"

"I know it was there."

"And it was still here when you came in again at three o'clock?"

"Of course it was."

"You have no doubt at all it was the same brush?"

"Turner, what are you getting at?" John cried. "I saw the brush when I came back at three o'clock, just where it was when I went away, and I noticed again what a mess Harold had made of the tip."

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"Then will you look now amongst those in the turpentine and find it?"

John went to the jar and scanned each brush in turn.

"It's not here."

"Is *this* the brush?" the Inspector asked quietly, producing one.

"Why, yes!" John said, going to examine it.

"Don't touch it, if you please, sir. Come as near as you like, but don't touch it. You can swear this is the brush Mr. Nelson used on Tuesday morning—that it was here when you returned in the afternoon and that it was the one he used when he came in at half-past four?"

"But you see the initials on it, don't you? You can see for yourself it is the one. But it's been in the dust somewhere; the brush part is all caked with it! I thought it had been put in the turps. Was it kicked into some corner after all? Where did you find it?"

"Just a moment, sir. I want you to sit down now and let me ask you something else."

John took his seat in an armchair on the other side of the unlighted gas-stove.

"We may as well have a fire anyway!" he said, bending forward.

"No, sir, please don't touch it just now," the Inspector said, preventing him with a quick gesture. "See here, Mr. Franklin, this little corner of burnt paper; do you remember it?"

"Yes, I do. I picked it up inside the fender here on Tuesday and gave it to you and said Harold must have used it to light his pipe and had left a perfect impression of his

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painty thumb on the corner. You remember my saying it, don't you ? ”

“ I do, sir. And the piece of paper itself ; look at it as closely as you like without touching it. Where should you say such a piece came from ? ”

“ Let me see,” John said, studying it, “ a corner of a very closely-lined paper with a mottled blue edge ; most likely quite a small piece originally. Oh, a page from a pocket-book or a small block, I should guess.”

“ Should you say it might have been a piece similar to this ? ” the inspector asked, handing him a small page of paper torn, with a perforated edge.

“ It's the same make of paper ; lines exactly the same distance apart ; the same blue mottled edge. Yes, I should say it undoubtedly came from the same source.” As he examined it John turned it over and glanced at the other side, which had an address on it.

“ Ernest's writing,” he said, “ something he put down for you, I suppose. Then the burnt corner was something he had written for Harold, and Harold used it as a spill. How like him.”

“ You would say these pieces of paper came from the same block or pocket-book ? ” the Inspector said thoughtfully, comparing the charred corner with the whole leaf.

“ I'm not an expert on makes of paper, whatever I may be on paint brushes ! That's more in your line. Do you think they did ? ”

The Inspector was silent.

“ Look here, Turner, you're keeping something from me. You're trying to mystify me,” John said. “ What's all this about ? What do you mean ? ”

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The Inspector was still silent, his eyes on the ground. "I'm thinking," he said at last.

"And you're not going to tell me what it's about?"

"Yes, Mr. Franklin—yes, I'll tell you," the other said; but still did not do so, and John began to grow uneasy. At length the Inspector glanced up and caught his eye, then with a sigh roused himself and holding up the corner of charred paper for John to see, said, "This impression of a thumb, Mr. Franklin——"

"Yes?"

"I found the same impression on the paintbrush."

"But, of course, Harold's brush, Harold's thumb," John said, staring at him.

"No, sir, this is not Mr. Nelson's thumbmark on the paper."

"Not his? How do you mean?"

"This is not his thumb-mark. I don't think he ever burnt this piece of paper. You see it; the mark of a thumb that had touched some yellowish-white paint, the paint that was smeared down Mr. Nelson's coat as he fell. There are finger and thumb-marks on the brush too, made by someone who had touched the paint. But they are not Mr. Nelson's marks. His hands were absolutely clean when he fell."

"I don't in the least understand you. *Anyone* might have smeared their hands if they touched him that day; and anyone might have picked up the paint brush or a piece of paper and afterwards flung it aside."

"But why should anyone burn a piece of paper at the gas fire at all just then?"

"It might have been thrown on the fire accidentally and fallen off."

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" Yes."

" But don't you think so ? "

" No, sir, I don't. I think it was burnt here deliberately; a piece of paper similar to the page on which this address is written was burnt here that day, and this charred corner with the thumb-mark is the remains of it."

" I can't see what you think it signifies."

" Mr. Franklin, I haven't told you where I found this paintbrush. It was in that tall vase of yours on the mantel-piece."

" In my vase ! " John exclaimed, startled. " What on earth made you think of looking there ? "

" Last night when I was down here, I noticed on the lip of the vase here near the rim, a spot of yellowish-white paint. You can see it from here. Now how did it get there ? "

John was silent.

" When I saw it I got a chair and looked down into the vase. This brush was there. You see it dry and caked with dust now from the bottom ; but when it was dropped in it must have been wet with fresh paint: there is the mark of paint inside the vase."

" But who on earth ? . . . and why . . . ? "

" A moment, Mr. Franklin, I have more to tell you than that. The tip of this brush where it is all shredded out from being, as you say, gnawed and chewed, had been soaked in prussic-acid."

" It's impossible. Impossible, Turner. Are you imagining that brush could have been the cause of Mr. Nelson's death ? "

" It could have been if he had put it into his mouth in that condition."

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"But how could he have got at the bottle? It was not in the room at the time."

"No."

"And supposing—supposing for a moment he could have prepared such a horrible thing beforehand . . . how could he ever have thrown the brush into the vase? Don't you see it's all impossible?"

"That would have been impossible; yes."

"Then, Turner, that disposes of the whole thing."

"Mr. Franklin, you say you can swear to this paintbrush. You can apply any test you like. This tip has been soaked in prussic-acid."

"If Harold had prepared it beforehand——"

"Then who thrust it into the vase? It was someone whose hands had touched that yellowish-white paint. The same fingers that had handled and I think burnt this piece of paper at the gas fire. And, Mr. Franklin, I've got to say it: the same fingers turned off the gas taps that day; see, I kept you from touching them just now. Look for yourself. You can see the marks of the paint for yourself."

"Turner, don't go on. Don't say any more. You can't have any idea what this sounds like."

"Mr. Franklin, I must go on; there's more still to say."

"You're simply torturing me!" John cried. "Why, it would mean——"

"What would it mean, sir?"

"Stop . . . let me think! Do you actually suggest that someone wanted to hide the brush? . . . Even so, that might have been done to shield Harold . . ."

"I wonder."

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"Oh, I can't bear this. Speak out. What are you hinting?"

"I shall come to that in a moment. There's just one more question. This cigarette-end that you called my attention to that day. It was lying on the floor on Tuesday. Who dropped it here? You yourself never smoke anything but a pipe. Did Mr. Nelson?"

"Never anything but a pipe."

"And Miss Brown never smoked in the studio, I think?"

"She never smoked at all."

"Miss Franklin smokes only those small Egyptian cigarettes. There's Mr. Bertram; was he by any chance smoking when he came on Tuesday?"

"No, he was not. He had his cap in one hand and the door-knob in the other."

"Nothing in his mouth?"

"No!"

"Then who dropped this cork-tipped cigarette? Who smokes this brand?"

"This is sheer guessing. The person you're hinting at was never inside this room before a quarter to five on Tuesday, when all was over with Harold. You know it was so. You have said so yourself."

The Inspector was silent again.

"Could anyone have slipped in that day? The side-door would be unlatched while we were in the garden. Turner, someone *might* have slipped in and prepared this horrible trap for Harold. Don't you think it is possible?"

"Mr. Franklin, suppose you question Mrs. Smith. Didn't you say she was in her room while you were in the garden that day?"

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" Yes. I'll ring for her now."

Mrs. Smith answered the bell, and brought in a small tray on which were tea-things together with the afternoon's letters ; then having placed these on a little table by John's side she would have withdrawn again ; but he signed to her to stay :

" Mrs. Smith," he began, and at something strange in his voice she started looking at him searchingly. " I want to ask you something . . . something important about last Tuesday. You remember when I spoke to you at Beckenham on Wednesday that I questioned you about what happened in the time immediately after lunch while we were in the garden ? "

" Yes, sir."

" Now the side-door was unlatched while we were out there. Were you in your room all the time except when you came with the coffee ? "

" All the time."

" Mrs. Smith, this is important, vitally important. Could anyone possibly have slipped into the studio during that time ? I don't mean Mr. Nelson, you told me about him."

" Excuse me, sir. Not Mr. Nelson, Dr. Cathcart."

" But you told me it was Mr. Nelson."

" No, sir, Dr. Cathcart."

" I've got it written down," John cried, snatching at his pocket-book, " your very words ! You said, ' Mr. Nelson made some final remark to Dr. Cathcart and then you heard him come into the house.' Didn't you mean it was Mr. Nelson who came ? "

" No, sir, I meant Dr. Cathcart. I thought it was clear."

" What made you think it was him rather than Mr.

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Nelson? You could not see either of them when they stood so near the house."

"But the step, sir! Dr. Cathcart's step is as unlike Mr. Nelson's as it is unlike your own."

"Then tell me again exactly what you did hear."

"Only what I've told you already, sir. Dr. Cathcart went across to the studio and in a minute or two he was out again and went through the tradesmen's gate and into the street."

"A minute or two?"

"Not more, sir."

"Thank you; that's all," John said, turning away. Nor did he move when she was gone, but sat silent, wretched, his eyes on the floor.

When at last he looked up it was to say in a changed voice, a voice the Inspector had never heard before: "Then Ernest was lying when he said it was Harold who ran back to the studio for those few minutes?"

"He lied then, and he lied when he said he had put Mr. Nelson's paintbrush with the others in the turpentine."

"Turner, it can't be. I can't believe it. This is the worst of all."

"Mr. Franklin, you know I would spare you if I could."

"I know—I know. But Ernest! How could it have been? Have you had any idea of this?"

"Never, sir, for one moment until last night, when I came down here to see if there was anything I had overlooked. Finding the paintbrush was the first shock. Then I found the end of it had been soaked in prussic-acid; that was the second. You see, sir——"

John looked at him.

"There were those tiny shreds of wood in Mr. Nelson's

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teeth that I thought came from his pipe. They came from the paint brush."

"Ah."

"And then the finger-marks; they weren't Mr. Nelson's. I had taken his and I compared them. This thumb-mark on the burnt scrap of paper: it's the thumb-mark that's on this full-sized leaf with the address on it. Dr. Cathcart tore the leaf from a little block that was thick with dust. I had asked him for the address of one of the offices where he called when he was looking for Miss Franklin's ring. You can see the print of his thumb; you can compare the two. Aren't they the same?"

"But why should Ernest burn a piece of paper here on Tuesday? and when did he do it?"

"It must have been while you were opening the windows. They're difficult to open; I've tried them. He thrust the brush into the vase and burnt something while your back was turned."

"Could it have been some formula, something connected with his work on poisons which he did not want anyone to see? Mr. Nelson might have had it on him and Dr. Cathcart may have known that, and realised how damaging it would be to himself if it was found."

"It's possible that was so."

"Turner—the whole thing may only have been a blunder . . . a piece of cowardice and nerves on Ernest's part. But not a crime, not a crime!"

"I've thought of that, sir. I've tried to think of everything. Try to look back and recall exactly what happened on Tuesday when Dr. Cathcart first came into the room. Had he anything in his hands?"

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"Nothing at all."

"No cigarette? He wasn't smoking?"

"Oh no."

"Then he could not have thrown it away then. Now when did he do it?"

John shook his head.

"But can you recollect at all if he seemed astounded at what had happened, or behaved like a man who receives a shock?"

"Mrs. Smith had prepared him. I can't remember very clearly. But think of the confusion we were all in at the time. Muriel fainting——"

"You have no sort of lightning impression of his first entrance?"

"I remember he seemed surprised that Muriel and I were there at all. He could not have expected to see us. He thought we should be out."

"More surprised to see you than to see his friend dead?"

"I can't answer that, Turner."

"Then, sir, can you tell me this: Did he tell you at once what the cause of death was?"

"No, He was trying to spare Muriel. He could not bring himself to blurt it out before her . . . to say that it was suicide."

"But when you were alone with him afterwards? Did he tell you it was so, or mention prussic-acid?"

"My nephew, I think, said the actual words."

"Your nephew, Mr. Bertram? He is a barrister. Yes."

"That could make no difference."

"I don't know, sir. Who first suggested that the police should be notified?"

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" Mr. Bertram, I believe. But, Turner, Ernest was trying to spare us. I'm convinced of it."

" Yes, sir ; it might easily be so ; but still, there's the paintbrush and the burnt piece of paper. Both bear Dr. Cathcart's finger-marks."

" But I've told you what I believe about those. He may have seen at once that death was caused by poison, and guessed that Harold had misunderstood some formula they had discussed about antidotes. He may even have found the formula in one of Harold's pockets and burnt it for fear lest he himself should be implicated if it fell into anyone else's hands. I believe it was something of that sort, I *do* believe it ! "

" It would all agree with what Dr. Cathcart said at the inquest. Yes. That all hangs together. But who soaked the tip of the paintbrush in the prussic-acid ? "

" Could that have been done accidentally ? "

" The bottle was bought by Mr. Nelson on his way to the studio that morning. He put it in his overcoat pocket and then threw the coat over the chair there. You say he was actually sucking the brush from time to time during the morning right up to lunch-time when he laid it on the table. Then when and how did it get impregnated with poison ? When Mr. Nelson came back at half-past four neither the coat nor the bottle was here."

John was silent again.

" When Mr. Nelson came that second time did he take up his brush and put the poisoned end in his mouth ? "

" I don't know. I wasn't watching him."

" But he may have done ? "

" Yes," John said, sighing.

" And he may have been killed in that way ? "

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"Yes."

"Now take the theory that it was suicide. Suppose Mrs. Smith was mistaken after all about the footstep and that it *was* Mr. Nelson who ran back to the studio. He would have found his brush here on the table; he knew the prussic-acid to be within reach. He could have prepared the brush then; he could have planned suicide and left things ready for his return."

"Yes."

"But I ask you, Mr. Franklin, why should he have done such a thing? If the case had been as we first thought—if he had been drawn into an intrigue with another woman and was false to the girl he was engaged to marry; if he felt the moment had come when he must confess everything and show himself for what he was—*then* he might have killed himself in a fit of shame. When I believed he might be in that position I did think suicide was possible." He waited a moment, but John did not speak.

"But it was no such thing. No hint or trace that he cared more for this Miss Brown than she did for him."

"No; but, Turner, there was the other motive. There was this blackmail going on—this person G. M. whom we've never been able to trace. You've forgotten about that!"

"No, Mr. Franklin, I haven't forgotten," the Inspector said. "I was just coming to it."

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CHAPTER XIII

THE LETTER

As he spoke, Mr. Turner took up the little wallet he always wore and drew from it a bundle of cheque-books which John recognised as the ones they had examined together at Harold's flat.

Turning over the counterfoils the inspector drew his attention to them.

"You remember these, Mr. Franklin? You remember we found there was a sum paid out each quarter, always for about the same amount—and that we thought it indicated a regular claim on Mr. Nelson, perhaps even blackmail? And you remember the counterfoils, where they were marked at all, were marked with the initials G. M.?"

John nodded.

"But that in one case there seemed to be a name—G. Marks, or G. Macks?"

"Yes, yes."

"Take this glass and examine the name again, will you?"

"I can make nothing different," John said, closely scrutinising the scrawl through a magnifying glass, "it still seems to be one of the two."

"Do you think it could be 'Masks'?"

"It might be. Yes."

"Then the letters we puzzled over might stand for

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'Gasmasks.' Wasn't that how Mr. Nelson used to talk of Dr. Cathcart's experiments ? "

" It was," John said, and dropped the cheque-book.

" You've told me he was interested in them. Now do you suppose he was sufficiently interested to finance them ? "

" It was certainly my impression at one time that he might do so . . . or help to do so."

" Did he possibly defray the expenses of that laboratory ? Could that be where the money went that was paid out under the initials G. M. ? "

" I wonder ! " John cried and fell silent, lost in speculation.

" You thought he had not been so keen about these experiments lately ? "

" No, he seemed to have lost faith in them."

" And you have noticed too that Dr. Cathcart has removed to poorer rooms ? That place where he sleeps is in a wretched house and the man there spoke of him in the way these people do of anyone who may owe them money. And the laboratory too. You say you have not seen it lately ; it bears all the marks of neglect . . . as though everything had been brought to a sudden standstill. It looks . . . everything seems to confirm the idea that Dr. Cathcart is in financial difficulties."

" Turner, what do you believe about him ? Speak out. You have said too much now not to say more."

" Mr. Franklin, I don't know what to believe. I want to put the facts before you and before myself. I've come here to-day for no other purpose. Dr. Cathcart has puzzled me from the first."

" You mean you've suspected him ? "

" No, sir. Never. Not for one moment. But I've been

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puzzled about him. He behaved strangely about his friend's death. From the time I entered the house I never saw a sign of regret or compassion in him. I know he believed Mr. Nelson was behaving dishonourably by Miss Franklin, and that, of course, would make him indignant against the man. But sudden, unexpected death will startle and soften most people, don't you think ? ”

“ Yes, that's true enough.”

“ And there have been other things. It was plain to everyone from the first that Dr. Cathcart knew a great deal more than he would tell us. That might be explainable on many grounds, but it was a fact, all the same, that he chose not to speak. When we've been talking things over he would sit silent and not help by a word. That made one take all the more notice of the things he did say—of the few facts on which he gave us any information at all.”

“ I can't recall any such facts.”

“ There were two that he volunteered. One was about the paintbrush Mr. Nelson dropped ; Dr. Cathcart told me he himself picked it up afterwards and placed it with the other brushes in the turpentine. You heard him say that ? ”

“ Oh yes.”

“ The other was that Mr. Nelson had run back to the studio for those few minutes after lunch. Both facts were vitally important as it turns out ; and naturally I had made a note of them and meant to check them. I never doubted the truth of either ; but you know it is my way. You had said you could identify the brush at any time, so I left it for the moment. But when I found a paintbrush last night under the circumstances and conditions I have stated, I could not doubt it was the actual one Mr. Nelson had been using when

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he fell. Then I saw that if this were so, Dr. Cathcart had deliberately lied to us in the matter. No one but he could have dropped it in the vase. No one else in the room was tall enough to reach it."

"No . . . that's true."

"That made me wonder instantly whether the other fact he had volunteered might be a lie also; and when I read through the words Mrs. Smith had used about it (words which I had copied direct from your note-book) they seemed to me ambiguous. She might have meant either of the two had gone to the studio. You, naturally, had the preconceived idea that it was Mr. Nelson, and you weren't thinking of questioning her on that point. You were only anxious to know how long a time had been spent in the studio by the person who did go there. I have never spoken to Mrs. Smith on the subject, though of course I should have done so. But I wanted you to do it to-day in my presence."

"Go on, Turner—you had better tell me everything now."

"There have been other things that Dr. Cathcart has said that have puzzled me. That second day when we were to meet in Mrs. Smith's room, and he came in early expecting to find you alone, and found Mr. Bertram and myself before him, do you remember how he said, 'You have been to Beckenham? You have seen Mrs. Smith and Muriel. Well?' Now wasn't there something strange in his putting Mrs. Smith's name first? Wouldn't his natural impulse have been to ask first about Miss Franklin? But he knew you must have questioned Mrs. Smith about this incident—and everything for him depended on her answer. He had to know how he stood. If she had caught a glimpse of him . . . then all must come out. Do you remember his look when he saw

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us all here ? I've seen men look just like that when they think a trap has been laid for them. Did he think he had walked into one ? That we had discovered a discrepancy and were there to confront him with it ? ”

“ I remember the incident.”

“ And take his whole attitude towards the question of how Mr. Nelson actually came to take the poison : he's never offered a suggestion of his own ; never expressed the faintest wish to investigate how it was done ; although in a doctor that would have been natural, let alone in a friend. When the idea was first put forward that Mr. Nelson might have got hold of a mistaken notion about an antidote, Dr. Cathcart opposed it as strongly as he well could, almost, you might say, violently. There he spoke from the professional standpoint. He couldn't accept the possibility for a moment. You remember how decidedly he spoke ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Yet when I had put another view before him, of the relief it would be to Mr. Nelson's friends if it should prove to be a mistake after all and not suicide, do you recall how he stopped short and said ‘ It would make a difference ? ’—and then later, ‘ *I see !* ’ in quite another tone. As if he were willing to consider the view if the reasons were sufficiently strong. And from that moment he changed his attitude entirely ; never spoke again of the impossibility of a mistake, even agreed that Mr. Nelson might have filled a capsule for himself. And at the actual inquest——”

“ But you thought he spoke up well then—that he made a point worth considering ? ”

“ Worth considering if he had never believed that at the time Mr. Nelson was carrying on a disgraceful intrigue—yes.

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Otherwise valueless, obviously invented for the sole purpose of doing the very thing I had suggested, to introduce a doubt which those who wished might always cherish ; an alternative to the horror of suicide. If the public knew of no reason why Mr. Nelson should take his own life (and none whatever was mentioned at the inquest) they might accept such an idea. Even the coroner might have been induced to think the whole thing misadventure. It would have been a possibility."

" You admit there was the possibility ? "

" Yes, sir ; but Dr. Cathcart did not think there was. He could not hold that opinion and at the same time hold this other one about Miss Brown. He had to give up one or the other. That's why I was struck when you told me about the note you showed him by mistake. Think for yourself, sir, for one moment, what he was pretending to maintain. The theory was that Mr. Nelson had been drawn into an underhand love-affair with this Miss Brown while professing all the time to be attached to Miss Franklin. I don't think I am exaggerating when I say that both Dr. Cathcart and Mr. Bertram believed he might actually have married her that very day."

" I'm almost sure they did.

" But could Dr. Cathcart believe, or could anyone who held that conviction believe that Mr. Nelson would choose to play a practical joke at the very moment when he was about to confess his dishonourable behaviour to Miss Franklin and to yourself ? Mr. Nelson was a gentleman. Do you think he could forget what a child Miss Franklin was ? How cruelly she would feel his conduct ? Do you think he would have no shame about it ? Mr. Franklin, I had only to listen to that man Williams speak of his master to be certain that he

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wasn't that sort of nature at all. Servants aren't deceived. The man would have known something of the matter and would have betrayed the fact somehow. Mr. Nelson would have had no inclination for practical joking at such a moment."

"No, no—it would have been impossible! How could I ever have imagined the thing!"

"Because, sir, you never in your heart credited this story about Miss Brown, and if there were no truth in that—if Mr. Nelson had nothing disgraceful to reveal to Miss Franklin that day, but only some matter about which he would have preferred for some reason to keep silence—then it would not have been so very unlike him to play a trick which might postpone the matter. But you can't have it both ways. That's why I say Dr. Cathcart himself never believed what he said at the inquest, and I don't suppose it deceived Mr. Bertram for a moment. He would jump to the conclusion that it was invented . . . well, for the reason I have just given. . . ."

"I suppose you're right, Turner. I see what you mean. But what did you yourself think when you heard him?"

"Well, sir, I saw that the truth or untruth of the one theory rested on the truth or untruth of the other, and that's why I got you to go off next day to find out what you could about Miss Brown. I had never been much impressed by the story about her and Mr. Nelson. It never seemed to me to fit in with what I heard of him. It was the girl herself that puzzled me . . . the things she said and her manner altogether! But I could never believe that Mr. Nelson would have chosen your studio and gone out of his way to bring her here of all places if he wanted to conceal any feeling he had

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for her. He had hosts of other artist-friends. You would have been the very one he would have avoided. Besides——”

“ Well ? ”

“ Well, sir, we don’t live in a story-book or on the stage, where such things can be kept hidden. You couldn’t have been in the same room with them for hours together and never suspected anything. The idea’s impossible. Such feelings always betray themselves ! Mr. Bertram and Dr. Cathcart may have been mistaken ; they seldom or never saw the two together. But you, sir——”

“ All you say sounds very reasonable, Turner ; but I can’t discuss it now. Have you more to tell ? ”

“ I have, sir.”

“ Well ? ”

“ You mentioned yesterday some gossip you heard at your club. Someone said in your presence that a man called Pengelly had met Mr. Nelson a day or two before his death coming away from the office of this man MacDonald whom we saw this morning. Last night when these discoveries made me begin to wonder again about Mr. Nelson’s financial position, I resolved to see Mr. Pengelly and afterwards to go with you to MacDonald himself. I chanced the fact that Mr. Pengelly might belong to your club, and rang up there to ask for him. By good luck he was on the premises at the moment, and when I told him who I was he said he would see me then and there if I would come round.”

“ You saw him ? ”

“ I did, and he was quite ready to talk and to tell me all he knew. He said he had met Mr. Nelson one day last week coming away from MacDonald’s and ‘ looking like a thunder-cloud,’ as he put it ; and he had some chaffing remarks with

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him. Asked him what he thought of the new betting laws, and Mr. Nelson seems to have answered that he wished someone would bring in a law to prevent arrant fools from betting—something to that effect. I asked Mr. Pengelly if he knew whether Mr. Nelson had been plunging a bit lately, or possibly been drawn in by anyone who had done him out of his money ; and he laughed and said he should not think so ; that Nelson was too sharp for that. In fact, he had been thinking that it might be the other way round—that Nelson had been leading astray that white-faced high-brow friend of his, whose name he never could remember ; because he had met this other man more than once coming out of MacDonald's place. I suggested no name but asked him if he could describe this friend of Mr. Nelson's more particularly, and Mr. Pengelly said, ' Oh, a dark-haired fellow with a regular Jonah of a face, bound to spot a loser every time.' ”

These last trifling words seemed to strike John more than anything that had gone before. He threw himself back in his chair and drew in a sharp breath.

“ You'll remember that MacDonald himself wouldn't give an answer as to whether or not Mr. Nelson had been acting for a friend. But when he called me back this morning he just said to me that I might get some information of the sort I wanted from a certain moneylender in Jermyn Street, a man of the name of Cohen.”

“ A moneylender—a Jew ! ”

“ Yes, sir, and I went to Cohen's place after I left you. The man himself was out of town for the week-end, but his partner promised to get at him and tell me what I wanted to know, later on. He practically admitted that a friend of Mr. Nelson's had borrowed money of them. . . . Of course,

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both Cohen and MacDonald can be forced to reveal the name if necessary. But Mr. Franklin—I want to prepare you—I want you to ask yourself if there's much room for doubt as to what that name will be."

John moved in his chair, got up, walked to the window, then came back to the fireplace.

"Oh, Turner, I've been a brute . . . a surly brute to you! You've been trying all day to spare me this, and I've done nothing but snap and snarl at you."

"No, no, sir. I know how hard it must be for you. It's come as a shock to me; it must be a terrible one to you."

"You think . . . you think——" John stammered.

"We come across this man at every turn, sir. Every opening I've tried seems to lead ultimately to him. If he can speak out and clear himself, God knows, I shall be glad enough, if only for your sake, for I know you like him."

"I don't know about liking him exactly. It was hardly liking. He was so reserved, so mistrustful of himself and everyone else. One never actually got near him. But I was sorry for him; he always looked as though life had worsted him and had no use for him. If *he* had committed suicide it would never have surprised me. But a crime, a horrible crime like this! How could he ever have brought himself to it? Desperate, I suppose. I remember now he looked wretched that day at lunch. And Harold's talk must have been torture to him. And Muriel was snubbing him too! If only he had spoken to me! If he had waited just twenty-four hours, when that mystery about Miss Brown would have been cleared up . . . and he forced to think more justly of Harold. Or if Harold himself had explained. But I suppose he shirked telling us that Ernest had let him in for all these

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expenses, and that was the reason why he could not take the house and wanted to put off the date of his marriage. He was a big-hearted, generous fellow ; that would be just like him. I was never fair to him——”

“ Mr. Franklin, you’re never hard on anyone. You’ve the kindest heart of any man I know.”

“ Oh, I’ve been blind, blind about all this. God ! what mistakes we all make about each other ! I hadn’t a guess at what was in the minds of one of those four on Tuesday ! But, Ernest—I don’t know how to think it of him. The misery it has caused, even apart from the crime itself ! Poor little Muriel, and that child on her wedding day, and that poor fellow Williams, the batman. Oh, if this is true I can never forgive him, I never can. He has made others suffer, and he deserves to suffer himself. . . .” He stopped short at these words, realising suddenly their significance ; then turned with a white trembling face to the inspector. “ Turner, where is he ? ”

“ That’s what I don’t know, sir.”

“ *You don’t know . . . you mean—— ?* ”

“ I don’t know where he is. You thought he spent last night at Beckenham. It was not so. He left your sister’s house about eleven o’clock and must have been in town, if he came to town, before midnight.”

“ If he came to town ? Where else should he go ? ”

“ I think he did come to town ; I think——”

“ Turner, what is it you think ? ”

“ These are the facts, Mr. Franklin. I left this house last night about eleven o’clock and went to your Arts Club. You were still writing that letter to him then. At what time did you despatch it ? ”

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"It was taken from here at half-past eleven; a few minutes later it would be in his laboratory letter-box. The place was in darkness then."

"I was, perhaps, a quarter of an hour in getting to your club and stayed there, say, half an hour. Then I went round to Mr. Nelson's flat and went through all these cheque-books and took a glance at other papers of his. I began to feel then, as I say, that Dr. Cathcart's name cropped up everywhere; but until I had actually interviewed MacDonald, I would not consider the possibilities involved in that fact. But I thought that late (or early) as it was I would try to see him. I could get no answer from his lodgings, and his laboratory was shut up. It was then about three o'clock."

"He did not sleep in River Street last night, I know."

"I heard that too. But I felt I must set a watch on him, and both places have been shadowed throughout this day."

"And he has not been near either?"

"He has not been seen."

"You know no more than that?"

"I am not certain of more. But just before I came here to-day one of my men reported to me that he had questioned a woman who has a house on the opposite side of the street——"

"Yes, yes?"

"And she thinks—she will not swear to the fact—but she thinks she noticed a light in the laboratory when she went to bed at twelve o'clock, and again somewhere between two and three when she got up to shut her window because of the storm. But she is so used to seeing a light there at all hours that she says she may have been mistaken. All I can tell you

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positively is that when I sent someone to watch the place at four o'clock this morning it was in darkness and there has been no sign or movement since."

"Between two and three this morning," John said, and the oppression that had been on him all day seemed to close down and overwhelm him.

"Turner, what are you going to do?"

Mr. Turner's eyes were on the floor.

"Everything will have to come out now . . . whatever it is?" John faltered.

The Inspector looked up; but his glance was suddenly arrested. With a quick change of voice he said, "Mr. Franklin—I see a registered letter amongst those Mrs. Smith brought in on the tray. Perhaps you will look at it."

John stretched his hand towards the little pile of letters, and drawing out the one indicated, examined it.

"Ernest's writing!" he exclaimed growing pale, and he broke it open with trembling fingers that would hardly obey him.

The first envelope contained two others. One, which was addressed and sealed, he looked at and then handed to the inspector. The other, which bore his own name and which held a letter of several pages, he carried to the window, struggling to read the words, though it seemed hours before the meaning of them reached his senses.

Abruptly, without a name at beginning or end, and dated simply, "Friday, midnight," it ran:

By this time you and Mr. Turner have probably discovered everything; but that means nothing to me now. My whole life and everything I have ever tried or hoped to do has ended in

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failure, and now the failure itself shall end. If there is anything left to tell let me tell it as shortly as possible.

I first met Harold during the war, as you know, and was of some use to him, and when we came across each other afterwards and he found out how much I dreaded the idea of trying to build up a new practice, he urged me to go on with the research-work in which I was interested and in which I had interested him. As I could not afford this he suggested a partnership ; he was to finance the experiments and when I succeeded we were to share the profits. I was full of hope at the beginning, but it was slow work and much more costly than either of us expected. Harold got tired of waiting for results, and told me so, adding that he needed the money for other purposes, and that the supplies must stop. He thought, indeed, that by our agreement I ought to repay him something of what he had advanced. He did not realise how small an income I had of my own and that I could not pay out a penny until I could get fresh work ; about which I felt absolutely hopeless. But his way of speaking stung me ; and I told him he should have the sum he mentioned in three months' time ; I gave him an IOU to that effect, and determined to raise the money even if I ruined myself.

I knew that at one time Harold had made large sums at horse-racing, and I remembered the name of the bookmaker he had employed and that he was an honest man. I resolved to try this means, and so went to MacDonald. I failed, as I was bound to fail, and found myself deeper in debt than ever. To pay off a part of what I owed MacDonald I borrowed of a moneylender and both men were soon pressing me for money, while I was hopeless of paying Harold at all. I was in despair, hunted on all sides.

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But something worse was added to all this—to my mind, worst of all.

Harold, as I thought, suddenly fell madly in love with Miss Brown, raved about her, was infatuated, was neglecting Muriel for her. You know I have always loved Muriel, though I never hoped to marry her or thought she could care for me, except as an elder brother. I was not even jealous when she chose Harold. She loved him, and if he could make her happy that was all I cared for.

But I thought he was making her miserable, that he would break her heart and ruin her life, and I hated him for it. I hated, too, the girl whose manner I never could make out, but who seemed to have some secret understanding with him. I made enquiries about her and learnt she had quite lately given up her work and was supposed to be engaged and about to marry some actor or artist whose name she would not reveal. I thought I could not be mistaken. I might have known——

That last day at your house everything reached a climax. Harold was jeering and mocking at me all through the meal and was—as I thought—torturing Muriel, working himself up to the last act of treachery. Something about the girl, Miss Brown, made me quite certain that they had planned to go off together that very day. I thought 'you yourself must be mad to be unconscious of it all; I could see that Muriel was miserable. And I was powerless to stop things. I was in Harold's debt and could not remonstrate with him, and it seemed to me that neither you nor Muriel would let me speak. I felt tortured, desperate, as I turned to leave the garden that day. As I passed Harold he tortured me further by joining me and muttering something which I hardly heard, something about "everything being all up now, bound to come out," to which I paid no attention.

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A day or two before this I had asked him to get for me at the chemist's a little prussic-acid for a small experiment I wanted to try. He had sometimes got chemicals for me and it was no new thing. He mentioned now that he had got it and that the bottle was in the pocket of his great-coat which was in the studio, adding that he would have no more to do with the researches. I cared nothing for what he said ; I only longed to get away from him, and I ran in across the passage to the studio. His coat was on a chair by the side of his easel ; on the other side was a table with his paint-brush and palette. Between them was his picture of the woman for whose sake he was false to Muriel. In a few minutes he would be painting her, making love to her, making plans. . . . In a flash I wished that as he stood there, gnawing at his paintbrush as he always did, he might drop dead with the first words he spoke. Then an impulse even quicker than thought made me tear open the bottle, snatch the paintbrush and stab the frayed end of it into the poison. It was an impulse, a mad impulse, never dreamed of until that moment. I swear to you that no such thought ever crossed my mind before. This is the only extenuating thing I will attempt to say for myself.

"When I had done it I slipped the bottle back in the pocket and left the studio, left the garden and went to my laboratory. I had no remorse. I hoped he would die. I was glad if I had killed him.

"When I grew a little calmer I thought out what was likely to happen. When I left you [the arrangement was that you and Muriel should be out for the afternoon, and Harold in the studio from three o'clock painting Miss Brown.

I imagined them there and felt sure that if the tragedy

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happened, the girl would cry out for Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Smith would almost certainly call me up. That seemed inevitable. I should come and should find him already dead with the bottle of poison in the coat beside him. It would be easy for me to arrange the bottle so that the thing would look like suicide. Then all the story of his intrigue with Miss Brown would be discovered, and no one would be greatly surprised at his act. It seemed simple and plain, as I planned it. It was not that I cared much whether my own guilt were discovered ; but for your sake and Muriel's I wanted there to be as little publicity as possible. Meanwhile I sat and waited.

When an hour passed and no call came I thought the thing had failed, that perhaps he had used some other brush, perhaps had never put the poisoned end in his mouth at all. I did not care then. I still hated him, but the moment of madness had passed. I was indifferent.

Half an hour later the call actually came and I rushed round in answer to it. I thought I knew what I should find.

But when I reached the studio all was utterly different. Harold had done just what I expected, had put the frayed end of his brush in his mouth, sucked the poison and dropped dead. But you and Muriel were there ; the room seemed full of people, the coat was gone ; I could not tell where or when—I was utterly at sea, hardly knew what I said or did. I saw at once there was no visible means by which poison could have been taken, that if I confessed to the crime at once there must be a sensational case, and horrible publicity for you all. Muriel's sudden outcry and distress unnerved me and, to complete the confusion, your nephew came in suddenly upon us. At once the whole thing became more complicated. As a barrister his view of things

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would be the legal one. If I wanted to escape I must act at once and carefully.

I remembered that Harold generally carried a pocket-book, that he probably had it on him at the moment and that inside it would be the IOU I had given him. If this were found it might draw suspicion on me, and I managed, while I was bending over him, to get the paper. My next thought was for the paint-brush. If that could be hidden I thought there would be no evidence against me and that death must be set down to suicide. But I feared to have either of them upon me, and I burnt the paper at the gas-fire while Mr. Bertram was out of the room and while you were opening the windows. I could not burn the brush or think how to get rid of it, so I dropped it into the tall vase on your mantel-piece. I thought it would be easy to slip in later and retrieve it; but I have never had the chance. If you have not already discovered it, it is there still. At the moment my one desire was to get time to think things over, to decide how best to act. Later on, when all the talk and discussion began, and when Mr. Turner seemed uneasy about Muriel's action in throwing away the little box and as to how that action might be interpreted, I could not rest until I had done something to clear up that incident. I think the happiest moments of my whole life were when I found her ring and was able to restore it to her. I did not care so much whether I lived or died; but I wanted to spare you and Muriel the distress of a public trial, if possible. I could not bear to leave you and her until I had done something to help you. Night and day I planned how I might at the inquest put forward some suggestion that would satisfy the public and at the same time be as little painful as possible for you; and when the time came I tried with all my might to make that suggestion sound plausible.

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"One other thing influenced me. I wanted you to learn for yourself the truth of Harold's relations with Miss Brown, so that if my own guilt should ever be discovered it might at least have some justification. I was more than ever certain of the truth of my suspicions by Miss Brown's manner at the inquest. I did not care what happened if only you realised that the man was a villain and unworthy of Muriel. I had no pity for him or for this girl who had fascinated him. She deserved to suffer as well as he. I had no remorse, either, for what I had done. When I saw Muriel to-day, calmer and more controlled than I had dared to hope, I was actually glad that I had rid her life of the man.

When I came back here to-night I found two letters waiting for me ; one from yourself and one from MacDonald, the book-maker of whom I have spoken.

His letter tells me that Harold called on him last week and asked him if it were true (as a friend of his had reported) that I had been visiting his office for betting purposes. Harold no doubt guessed the reason of my going there, and he demanded the whole account of my transactions from MacDonald, pretending that I had acted on his instructions and he wished to settle all liabilities. This he actually did, and in his letter to-night MacDonald tells me that Mr. Turner has rung him up to-day and means to call with you to enquire into the details of Harold's account with him. He tells me that in certain eventualities he must give you my name. Up to this minute I had no idea that Harold knew I had ever seen MacDonald.

The other letter, the one from yourself, tells me the whole story of Miss Brown's marriage with an utter stranger, and her reasons for the secrecy about it. It shows me, too, the falsehood of all I had imagined about her ; all my injustice to Harold.

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I will not try to tell you of my feelings as I sit here and read and re-read these two letters ; what are my feelings worth ? But there is, perhaps, one thing I can do which may lighten a little the burden thrown on your shoulders. It is all there is left for me to do.

I have written and now enclose with this a letter to the coroner, confessing that I committed the crime, and telling the exact means I used and each step I took ; giving as the sole reason the fact that I owed Mr. Nelson a large sum of money which I could never repay ; but making no mention of the other motives that influenced me. Why should they be dragged in when they rested only on a delusion—had no existence at all but in my own mad imagination ?

It is two o'clock now and I am going out to get someone to promise to register and post this as soon as may be after the offices are open. Then I shall return to the laboratory.

Keep Muriel's name and Miss Brown's out of the trouble if you can. As for the rest, as for what you may choose to tell Muriel herself—that must lie with you. I have no right ask or expect mercy of anyone.

This letter, when at last he had come to the end, fell from John's hand as he stood by the window, still only half-conscious of what he had read, or of what had happened.

At last a touch on the arm roused him and he found by his side the Inspector with a face almost as pale and stricken as his own. In his hand he held the sealed envelope addressed to the coroner.

John stooped and, picking up the last sheet of his own letter, held it out for the other to read. With a brief survey of it Mr. Turner was satisfied, murmuring, " Put it aside now,

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sir. Lock it up until after the inquest. Then, unless it is asked for, burn it."

"You think that other will be sufficient?" John said.

"I hope so. I think so."

"But you, Turner, you'd like to see this . . . to know . . ."

"No sir, I know enough. I can guess the rest. But I must go; I mustn't stay here a moment longer."

"Yes, yes, of course. But . . . but shall I come too? Ought I to come?"

"Not unless I send for you. Stay here and if I want you I'll ring you up."

"You . . . you'll let me know . . ."

"Yes, sir; that will be necessary in any case."

The two men parted on this and John was left alone in the silent room where but a few days ago he had sworn beside Harold's dead body that his name should be cleared.

CHAPTER XIV

EPILOGUE

It was three weeks later, and in the hall of John's little house was assembled a neat array of boxes and trunks strapped and labelled for foreign travel, while the house itself had a dismantled look, the furniture primly disposed and covered with dust-sheets.

The whole character of the place was changed, and only Mrs. Smith's little den looked as usual, while Mrs. Smith herself as usual moved about busily occupied in noting instructions, consulting lists and supplying last-minute demands.

Muriel, dressed for travelling, came down the stairs from her bedroom and passed amongst the piled-up luggage to the studio where she knew she would find her father. In her dark coat with a black band on the sleeve she looked graver and paler than she had looked three weeks ago ; but she smiled resolutely and bravely as she entered the room.

John stood at the moment before a picture which had just come from the framer's, and which he now took out and put on the mantel-piece.

In John, too, there was a change, and though his smile was as ready and the twinkle in his eyes as quick and kindly as ever, something had gone from him, something of the irrepressible boyishness which had always been so characteristic.

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Only one blind in the dismantled studio was drawn up, and the sunlight poured in at this opening on to the picture which Muriel went near to examine.

"Phyllis, I mean Mrs. Carruthers!" she said, and looked closely at it. John meanwhile was neatly addressing a label. "But what a different sort of frame you've chosen. Not a bit your usual kind——"

"Isn't it?"

"Of course it's not; it's much more elaborate."

"It's for a special occasion, you see. A wedding present."

"'Portrait of Mrs. Hubert Carruthers as "Cleopatra," by John Franklin, R.A.' " Muriel read out; "but why do you call it a portrait?"

"Just a fancy of mine——"

"And why do you put your name in that way? You always say that there's no need for an artist to sign a picture; that if he's painted it he has signed it already."

"Well, I thought that might please the Bank of England."

"The Bank . . . ? Oh, you mean Mr. Carruthers. Why will you call him *the* Bank of England? He's only a little bit of it."

"My dear, if you were a geologist you'd know that a small fragment is quite sufficient to give the characteristics of a whole rock. It contains all the essentials."

"You always speak of him in that ridiculous way! But you did quite like him when you met him, didn't you?"

"I don't talk in that airy way about liking the Bank of England. I see it; I recognise it; I walk round it and observe it with awe; I take my hat off to it. But as for liking or disliking it. . . . Well, I ask you, how could I?"

"But what happened when you saw him first? Did

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Phyllis point him out to you, or did they rush into each other's arms? "

" I'm surprised you should ask such questions. 'Arms,' indeed; and in public! No, I saw him at once; and as the train drew up at the other end of the platform and as he didn't see us, I put Mrs. Carruthers in a safe place and went along to fetch him."

" But how did you know him? "

" Know him? I saw no one else on the station."

" No other people? Oh, you're joking; but was he so obviously English? "

" My dear, he was England personified. If the whole country were destroyed to-morrow it could be reconstructed from the person of Mr. Carruthers."

" But wasn't it very awkward introducing yourself? How did you do it? "

" I just went up to him and raised my hat and said, 'The Bank of England, I believe.' "

" No, Daddy, you didn't. Tell me what really happened."

" Well, it amounted to that. And of course he said, 'Excuse my glove,' or something of that sort; and then I said, 'I am John Franklin, who recently had the honour of painting Mrs. Carruthers' portrait, and now have had the further honour of escorting her to Paris——'"

" I don't want to hear any more of that nonsense! Do tell me truly. . . . He did show some feeling, some agitation, didn't he? "

" Yes, he did. He actually hurried along the platform at such a rate that I could hardly keep up with him."

" And he was excited . . . overjoyed to see her? "

" Naturally I didn't witness the meeting. I exercised my

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customary tact and said I would see about Mrs. Carruthers' luggage. But," with a glance at the picture, "I can tell you who *was* excited and overjoyed at the meeting!"

"Yes, poor Phyllis . . . after all she had been through," Muriel said, and sighed; but making a gallant effort, went on, "but you saw him again? You told him."

"I told him all that it was necessary for him to know."

"And he did understand how absolutely clear *she* was?"

"Be sure I made him understand that, sweetheart."

"Well," the girl went on, trying to maintain her light tone, "now go on and tell me some more about them. And do try to be serious. You do think, then, that he really cares for her?"

"I do. I believe that if the Bank of England were on fire, and his wife was in a blazing house on the other side of the street, he would hesitate as to which way he should tell the firemen to direct the hose."

"That sounds rapturous; but I can't believe a word you say of that man. You make me quite sorry for him."

"Sorry for him! He's got the loveliest wife in the kingdom and one of the sweetest—I told him so; and rubbed it well in. *Well* in. I only hope some of it may stick, that's all!"

"Tell me about Phyllis, then. You saw her again too, of course."

"I did. They both came to lunch with me next day and I took them for a drive afterwards."

"And what happened? How did Phyllis look?"

"Phyllis looked an angel; clad appropriately in white. When she threw back her cloak I felt like Pygmalion before Galatea."

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"That was a very appropriate feeling, and most original of you! And she seemed happy . . . recovered?"

"She seemed so happy that I could have kicked that stolid lump of a bridegroom. He might just as well have stuck to his little old lady of Threadneedle Street."

"Don't be spiteful, darling; it doesn't become you. They were lunching with you. Did it go off well?"

"It was all of the most correct; almost Ollendorffian, in fact. I proposed the health of the bride and bridegroom; he naturally proposed mine. I expressed a hope that it might not be long before I had the happiness of meeting them again; he concurred with me and intimated that he and Mrs. Carruthers would never forget to whom they owed the happiness of their present re-union."

"I'm glad he was grateful."

"Oh yes; he turned his phrases most neatly. I wish I could believe he would be half as appreciative of that incomparable woman, Mrs. Paxton. Did I tell you about her asking me if I thought she need take lessons in elocution before she was introduced to Mr. Carruthers? However, he said all that was appropriate on the occasion I was speaking of. Indeed, I feared at one moment the repose that stamps the caste of Vere de Vere was going to be broken, and that we should all dissolve in a most dreadful B.A.F."

"Do you really think they would care to see *me*?"

"Oh yes, indeed. The Bank of England specially bade me tell you that it would give them the greatest possible pleasure to receive you whenever you could come, and *however often*."

"Why, that's quite gushing! But . . . but Phyllis . . . can she ever . . . ever bear . . .?"

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"Phyllis thinks only of *your* feelings, darling."

"I should like to see her . . . later on," Muriel said ; but sadness fell on her face.

"But if I'm ever to finish this story, let me hurry up!" John said briskly ; "for I expect Turner in to say good-bye in a minute ; and then poor old Williams wants very careful instructions how to look after the studio in my absence, without offending Mrs. Smith's feelings and making her jealous."

"Daddy, we're not really giving up the house, are we? Your dear little house and the studio. . . ."

"My dear, we're not going to make any definite plans at present. We'll consider that question when we come back. Now, does your curiosity prompt you to ask any more questions about the Bank of England?"

"What were you grinning about just now?"

"Don't use that word about my smile, please."

"I shall if you don't tell me the reason. What happened when you took them for that drive?"

"Why . . . I took them for a drive in a goodish car along the Boulevards, that's all ; there's no fault in that, I hope?"

"No ; but that isn't all. I can see it isn't."

"Well, not quite, perhaps. You see, it was a lovely day and I thought we might walk a few yards——"

"And of course everyone stood and stared at Phyllis, and her husband was horrified. Daddy, I'm *ashamed* of you!"

"Why, it wasn't my doing. But it seems that someone recognised her and pointed her out. But as your true Parisian doesn't take the art of the cinema seriously, it was translated into a rumour that she was a beautiful young English actress

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just married to a scion of our aristocracy . . . and there was frantic curiosity about her ! The whole place was in a buzz the moment she alighted from the car. . . . We were literally surrounded, hemmed in, couldn't move ! I had to appeal to the gendarmerie before we could scramble back to safety. If you could have seen the Bank of England just then ! The stony face of it brick-red with dismay. And Phyllis herself looking lovelier and lovelier every moment in her confusion and embarrassment. It was a study in the *entente cordiale*, I can tell you ! ”

“ Yes, and you gloated over it, I know you did. But I don't wonder they lost their heads over her. She *is* lovely ” ; and Muriel turned again to the picture. “ And so is your portrait of her. I think it's the best thing you've ever done. But haven't you altered it in some way ? It looks different. . . . You've added something. What is it ? ”

“ No matter what it is. Perhaps I wanted, as the photographers say, to do her ‘ more than justice. ’ ”

“ I think you always did her justice ; I wish I had,” Muriel said. “ Oh, Daddy, I know you think it's better we shouldn't talk of it. . . . But I . . . ”

“ Now, darling ; for my sake, as well as yours ! ”

“ Yes, yes, I know. I know how hard it is for you to have had all this trouble and now to have to leave your work and our little house and to go abroad with me. And you know I do mean . . . mean not to be an anxiety to you.”

“ Of course I know it ; and we're off for a thorough change, just to get our bearings again and to see what the little old world is like.”

“ The *little* world ? ”

“ Why, yes. You've often heard people say how small

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the world is. Now we're off to see how small it really is."

"I thought you used to wish you could find how big it was——"

"No!" said John firmly. "No more of that! Small things are good enough for me. I'm like a character I read about in some book the other day whose prayer was, 'O God, I don't want anything big; only lots and lots of little things.'"

"Daddy, I could be so much happier if you'd only tell me . . ."

"For my sake, chuck, as well as for yours, remember."

"Oh, but do listen to me just this once . . . tell me this one thing! I know about poor Ernest. Arthur says he wasn't responsible for what he did; that it was the clearest case of temporary insanity throughout. And that's what I tell myself and want to believe always. But I can't help feeling that somehow . . . somehow . . . *I* was partly to blame . . ."

"Well, my dear," John said after a moment's pause, during which he took up and addressed a second label, "perhaps that isn't altogether a bad feeling to have."

"Oh, Daddy . . . then it was . . . it was really because of me . . ."

"No; I never said that; and that isn't what I meant, either."

"Do, do tell me," implored the poor child, growing paler and paler.

"Ah, but the days of moralising parents are over!" John said; "and we're all so priggishly afraid of being prigs that it's difficult to say what one does mean. But perhaps we're

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all partly to blame when things or people go wrong ; a little bit of everyone's fault : the accumulation of all the false impressions and stupid misunderstandings and headlong impulses which pile up and 'make a mighty mountain,' as Dr. Watts might have said. If I had had a little more perception ; or if Ernest had been more trustful and not brooded in secret . . . or if you and Harold . . . But there, that's enough. You see what I mean and all the moralising in the world won't undo the past. Now, I hear Turner being shown in, and Arthur will be round with the car in a minute. Run off and say good-bye to Nanny."

The inspector walked in, brisk and smiling, and the two men greeted each other with their customary friendly understanding. Like Muriel, he was at once attracted to the picture on the mantel-piece.

"You're giving this away as a present, sir?" he said, with something like awe in his tone.

"I am, Turner ; I'm committing that act of princely generosity ! You see, the fact is, Mr. Carruthers doesn't exactly fit into either class of my patrons. He isn't a millionaire, so I can't ask millions of him ; and in spite of his sound views about my own pictures, I don't count him a connoisseur of art. So there seemed nothing else left to do."

"He's a very fortunate man, whatever he is."

"There we're agreed. He's got the original as well as this priceless portrait. So you think, like Muriel, that it's the best thing I have done?"

"Not quite that, sir ; I don't think you'll ever beat the little sketch of the Embankment you did from the window upstairs ; you know that's always been my favourite," and he looked round for the picture which, however, was not in

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its usual place on the now dismantled walls. "But this is a wonderful piece of painting, all the same."

"I believe you're jealous, Turner," said John, severely. "And don't look at the portrait any more; Mr. Carruthers might not approve. Now, come to business, and just tell me why you haven't come to it before. You knew I was off this morning. Why should your little account be left for settlement until the last minute?"

"Oh, Mr. Franklin, I hoped you wouldn't mention that. It was my own time, you know, and barely three days of it, for I was away all that Friday. Besides——"

"Well?"

"Well, sir, I count that you yourself did more than half the work; I do indeed."

"Ah! so I'm like the gentleman in the play who had talked prose all his life and never known it. I'm a detective unawares, am I?"

"You've got all the gifts, sir. I've told you so before, and I shall always say so."

"I can beat you at your own game, can I? But you think you can beat me at mine and be princely generous too? Well, I'll just prove you're wrong there. I *was* sharp enough to put two and two together and divine your intentions; and when I didn't receive an account for tuppence-halfpenny 'per expenses incurred for services rendered'—I guessed what you would be at! But I'm going to deprive you of that little satisfaction. As you came in I was writing your name on a label to be affixed to this package and despatched to your private address as soon as I'm gone. It isn't fastened up yet so you may as well look at the contents."

"Oh, sir!" Mr. Turner cried, his face a study in itself of

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mixed joy and shame as he drew out the very picture of which he had spoken. "You mean this for me? It's too much!"

"You've just called me a detective, Turner; then pray recall your own methods. And apply them. Facts, facts, facts always. Words, words, words—never!"

"But this will be the biggest treasure I shall ever own, sir. And if I may say so, it's just the size for a small house; for a small room, like mine!"

THE END



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